Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 41

The Story of my Life

Part: 1

Look at that fairy said Lavender, thoroughly irritating Naddalin.

Anyone would have thought Dargide had never- ever shown them, impressive creatures the- Slobber-worms had been a bit dull, even Kayla with the big brown eyes said, but she- Salam errs And Peryton (a baby doe with wings) had been interesting enough, besides she- Explosion Concluded Harpy too much so-o.

‘Kindly keep your voices down, girls!’ said Professor Grubbly Plank abruptly, scattering a hand soul of what

looked like coffee beans among the- creatures, who at once fell upon the- food. ‘So, anyone knows the- names of these creatures? Miss. Kizziah?’

‘Puffskein, OMG CUTE-’ said Emmah.

They are hierarchy guardians, usually live in tail foliage that they color match, at night when all this world comes to life in its vividness, and dark worldly contests.’

‘Five points for Amsel,’ said Professor Grubbly Plank, on the floor squeaked, and creaked.’

Yes, these are Puffskein, as Miss. Kizziah rightly says, they generally- live in foliage whose tinder is of wand quality, and a night these weepy trees glow in cobalt blue, and shimmer, with pulsating lighter shade of blue and white, to your heartbeat girls, with you touch the tree looking in your wings to it, and form those trees you get these little fuzz balls of fun. Anybody know what she eats?' Also, the potion we use a shampoo for are wings for these girls that have them, that want to make them irresistible to a boy or to keep them shiny and clean.

‘Centipedes,’ said Emmah promptly which explained why what Naddalin had taken to be grains of brown coffee’ beans were moving about.’

Then it was said- ‘But fairy eggs if she-y can get them, yet that is hard over the fairy-like them to eat more.’

‘Good girl, take another five points. So, whenever you need leaves or wood from a tree in which a Puffskein- cabins in a tree, it is wise to have a gift of centipede’s ready to distract or placate it.

They may not look dangerous, but if angered they will try to score out human eyes with their finger's nails, which, as you can see, are very sharp, besides not at all needed near the- eyeballs.

So, if you would like to get any closer, take a few centipedes, and a Puffskein, and play with it like it is a newborn baby- girls…

I have enough there for one between two of, so you can study them more carefully, prudently, sensibly, and cautiously.

I want a draft from each of you with all body parts labeled by the- end

of the class period, and a drawing, of how you think they really should look under that fuzz-ness, pulled out from your mind like a gray twisted cobweb- out on to my desk.

The- class poured like a herd of cattle stampeding forwards around the- trestle table.

Naddalin deliberately rains around and circled the- back of her, so that she- ended up right next to Professor Grubbly.

‘Where’s Dargide…?’ She- asked, she, while everyone else was

Hayvanna-hosing Puffskein.’

Never you mind,’ said Professor Grubbly repressively, which had been she attitude last time Dargide had failed to turn up for a class, too.

Smirking all over her pointed face, Drallieah Mallerie leaned across Naddalin and apprehended the- smallest and the cutest Puffskein, that she could find- she had her eyes on her for she was the small one out- like her.

‘Maybe,’ said Mallerie in an undertone, so that only Naddalin could hear her, ‘the- stupid great klutz’s got herself severely injured.’

‘Maybe, like- you will if you don’t shut up,’ said Naddalin, out of the- side of her mouth.

‘Maybe, she’s been messing with paraphernalia- and things like that- that’s too big for her if you get my drift.’

Mallerie walked away, smirking over her shoulder at Naddalin, who felt unexpectedly sick.

Did Mallerie know something? Her daddy was a Death Devourer; what if she- had information about Dargide’s fate that had not yet reached the- ears of the- War?

She- hurried back around the- table to Emmah who was crouching on the- wood floor, some distance away, attempting to persuade a Puffskein to remain still long enough for them to draw it in their minds, and retrieve it in their cognizance.

Naddalin pulled her thought out of the back of her head with index finger with quill still in-between the other's, crouched down beside the- others, related in a whisper what Mallerie had just said.

'Duerre would know if something had happened to Dargide,' said Emmah simultaneously.'

It is just playing into Mallerie's hand as if to look worried; it told her we do not know exactly what is going on.

We must ignore her, Naddalin. There, hold the- Puffskein for a moment, just so, I can draw its face… using my mind.

'Yes,' came Mallerie's clear drawl from the- group adjacent them,' Daddy was talking to the- Martita just a couple of days ago, you know, and it sounds as though the- Bureau is determined to crack down on sub stand teaching in the place.

So even if that overgrown moron does show up again, she will perhaps be sent packing straight away.’

‘OUCH!’ I say…

Naddalin held the- Puffskein so hard and was hugging it so tightly, that it had almost snapped, (OMG- I want to keep it.)

Also, it had just taken a great retaliatory swipe at the hands with its sharp fingers, leaving four long deep cuts there. Asking if they could be declawed.

Naddalin dropped her saying that very question, yet still thinking she was the cutest thing ever.

Carllah and Goyle, who had already been chuckling at the- idea of Dargide being sacked, laughed still harder as the- Puffskein set off at full tilt towards the- Forest, a little moving fuzz ball soon swallowed up among the- tree roots and tall grasses.

When the- bell faintly bounced over the- grounds, Naddalin rolled up the bloodstained Puffskein picture, that she now had down her hand still bleeding, and marched off to the biology with the hands wrapped in

Emmah’s handkerchief, And Mallerie’s mocking laughter still ringing in the ears.

‘If she- calls Dargide a moron one more time…’ said Naddalin through gritted teeth.

‘Naddalin, don’t go picking a ruckus with Mallerie, don’t you forget, she’s perfect now, she- could make life difficult for you…’

‘Wow, like, I wonder what it would be like to have a difficult life?’ said Naddalin sarcastically.

Jinger laughed, but Emmah frowned. Together, they tramped across the- grassy patch.

The- sky still appeared unable to make up its mind, of what it wanted to do, when- she looked up, it looks as if it wanted to rain or cry down on us for letting them all go.

‘I just wish Dargide would hurry the hell up and get back, that’s all,’ said Naddalin in a muffled faint voice, as they reached and starched in the- greenhouses that they were back in it.’

Besides do not say that is so, that Grubbly woman's a better teacher!' She- added bullyingly.

'I wasn't going to,' said Emmah calmly.

'Because she will never be as good as Dargide,' said Naddalin determinedly, fully aware that she- had just qualified an exemplary Care of Magical Creatures Lessons… Also, was methodically annoyed about it.

The- door of the- nearest greenhouse opened with a whoosh, and some teens spilled out of it, including Jill, as the winds picked up.

‘Hi,’ she- said luminously as she- passed. A few instants later, Danna Lovegood emerged, trailing behind the- rest of the- class, a blotch and smear of the earth on her nose, along with the hint in her hair tied in a knot with long ribbons, on her- top of her head.

When she- saw Naddalin at once, she prominent eyes seemed to bulge all big like and excitedly wild like, and she- made a beeline straight for her. Many of the classmates turned curiously to watch it all godown.

Danna took a great breath at once she said, without so-o much as a preliminary hello,’ I believe the- Who

Must Not Be Named is back, and you fought about her, and she escaped from you.'

'Er- right,' said Naddalin awkwardly now. Danna was wearing what looked like a pair of Auburn radishes for earrings, a fact that Parvati and Lavender had perceived, as they were both giggling and pointing at her earlobes.

'You can laugh,' Danna said, she voices rising under her- an impression that Parvati and Lavender were laughing at what she- had said that what she- was wearing,' but people used to believe there were no such

things as she- Blabbering Humdinger or her- Crumple- Horned Snorkack!'

'Well, they were right, weren't they?' Said Emmah impatiently.

There weren't any such things as she- Blabbering Humdinger or her- Crumple-Horned Snorkack.'

Danna gave her a wishing look and flounced away, ravishes swinging madly Parvati and Lavender were not she- only ones hooting with laughter now.

'De' you mind not offending her- it was said… you are the only people who believe me?'

Naddalin asked Emmah as they made their way into class.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, Naddalin, you can do better than her- go in your picking of…’ said Emmah.’

Jill’s told me all about her; she well only believes in things if there is no proof at all-right?

Well, I wouldn’t expect anything else from someone whose daddy runs the- Star-paper.’

Naddalin thought of she-ominous winged horses, and dear and other things in and around that were flying about the heavens above- they-

had seen on the- night she- had arrived and how Danna had said she- could see them as well.

Her spirits descended slightly, and had she- been lying…? However- before she- could devote much more thought to the- matter, Ernie Macmillan had stepped up to her.

‘I want you to distinguish,’ she- said in a loud, resonant voice,’ that it’s not only weirdos who support you.

I partially believe you one hundred percent. My family has always stood firmly behind Duerre, so-o do I.’

‘Er thanks very much, Ernie,’ said Naddalin, taken aback but pleased. Ernie might be pompous on occasions like she, but Naddalin was in a mood to deeply appreciate a vote of confidence from somebody who did not have ravishes dangling from their ears.

Ernie’s words had certainly wiped the- smile from Lavender Brown’s face also as she- turned to talk to Jinger and Emmah, Naddalin caught Laila’s expression, which looked both confused and defiant.

To nobody’s surprise, Professor Burgeon started their lessons by lecturing them about the- importance of

flying with wings all the things like them.

Naddalin wished all the- teachers would stop doing that all… as she already felt like she knew it.

She- was starting to get an anxious, twisted feeling with-in her like every time she- remembered how much homework she- had to do, a feeling that gets worse dramatically when Professor Burgeon gave them, hitherto another essay at the end of class.

Exhausted and smelling stingingly of dark angel’s dung, Professor Burgeon’s preferred type of fertilizer, she- Colette’s trooped back

up to the- castle an hour and a half later of so-o, none of them chitchatting very much at all; it had been yet, another exceptionally long day.

As Naddalin was ravenous, and she- had her first detention with Scott at 5:35, she- headed straight for dinner without dropping off her bag in Colette Tower so, that she- could pin something down before facing whatever she had in store for her.

She- had hardly touched and stretched into the- entrance of the- Great Hall, moreover, when a loud angry voice yelled, ‘Oh!’

‘What now…?’ At once she- murmured unenthusiastically, turning to face Angelina Readgirl, who looked as though she- was in a wave of immense anger.

‘I’ll tell you what now,’ she- said, marching straight up to her and stabbing her hard in the- chest with her finger.’

‘How come you have one yourself in confinement for 5: 45 on Friday?’

‘What…?’ Said Naddalin.’ Why…? Why- oh yes, Keeper tryouts!’

‘Now she- remembers…!’ Then Angelina snarls at her face.’

‘Um- didn’t I tell you like I wanted to do a tryout with the- entire team, did I not?’

Additionally, to find someone who fitted in with everyone! Didn’t I tell you I would book the- Claepsiara pitch particularly?

Moreover, now you have categorical you are not going to be there!’

‘I didn’t decide to be there!’ said Naddalin, tingled up by the- wrong of these words.’

I got detention from that Scott woman, just because, I told her the- complete truth about- ‘You Know Who.’

‘Well, you can just go straight to her and ask her to let you off on Friday,’ said Angelina fiercely.’

I for one do not care how you do it, just do it… Tell her- You Know Who’s an illusion of your imagination if you like also, just make sure you’re there before long.’

She- turned on her heel, twisting it, and stormed away hopping on one foot.

‘You know what…?’ Naddalin said to Emmah and Jinger as they arrived at the- Great Hall.’

I think we’d better check with Puddlemere United when- the Oliver Wood’s been killed during a training session because Angelina seems to be channeling the spirit.’

‘What you reckon are the- odds of Scott letting you off on Friday?’ said Jinger skeptically, as they sat down at, she- Coletta- table.

‘Less than zero,’ said Naddalin miserably, tipping baby dear meet, on to her plate, that passed and starting to eat her.’ Had better try- not to cry,

thinking about this baby girl that did not have a life, though, had not I, feel it coming on and I did.

I will offer to do two more detentions or something, I cannot do this- 'like a big girl…' she cried running out of the Hall… like a 2-year-old, little girl with hair ribbons on both sides of her shoulders.

She- swallowed a mouthful of mashed potato and added, I hope she would- does not keep me too long this evening- for not eating everything on my plate.

You realize we must write three essays, practice Vanishing Spells

for McDermott, work out a counter-charm for Flitwick, finish she- Puffskein drawing and then like- um- start that wonder dream diary for Solis?'

'Lost in a dream- how wonderful…'

Life Without Meaning

Continued: 1

A life without meaning she said to me… sitting next to her in class…

I am Taylor- the girl you are going to do your dream studies with… Your Naddalin right?

‘Yes- Yes!’

‘A Life without meaning…’

…?...

That is what my life is now, she said. I do not live in the present or future. I do not live in what might happen today or what might happen

tomorrow. I live in the past. I have lived my whole life in Greensburg Pa. and all these years have been the same.

Every day, I got noticed by everyone even by the teachers sometimes! I mean, I thought teachers were supposed to be there for you, but that excludes the teachers here at the school.

The reason- why- I was always the one to get picked on was because I was not like the perfect models that sashayed down the hallways of my school like they were at a fashion show or something. It seemed to me that out

of all the girls that went to my school, I was the only odd one out.

My life and soul along with all of those in my family, ended on that fateful day, Saturday two months ago. The only difference between me and my family is that my body is still living. And I am just going to have to live with the guilt...

Everything that happened was because of me. Flying high above the clouds, I looked down, shocked at the beauty of the countryside. I could see a light breeze go through the trees below me, of course, I was too high to feel it. I looked at me, just for fun.

My golden hair flying fast behind me, my wings, an iridescent mix of purples, pinks, and blues, shined as they flapped. I angled my body and swooped down as I passed a lake and scooped up some water. I took it back up to the clouds, not spilling a drop. The week leading up to that Saturday was normal.

A typical Pa. morning. It was the week leading up to Spring Break when we were going on a family camping trip. Of course, we were all excited. We had not gone camping for four years since my little sister Hannah was born so it would be her first time.

Which only made it more exciting because we wanted it to be perfect. My little brothers Dean and Daniel and my older brother Chad and, I had already camped before, but we still could not wait.

I did not have that long, blonde hair that swept against their back or the beautiful bangs that hung over their forehead, causing them to flip their head to move it, which they did gracefully like swans. We were supposed to leave that Saturday and had a lot of packing to do.

Nevertheless, that just made me look even worse. I did not have that

perfect hourglass figure or the flawless features. But what I did have was a lot of zits, especially on my cheeks. And my body weight was 115 lbs., but it felt like so much more. To cover up my face, I hung my hair in it all the time, even on the hottest days ever!

We woke up every morning that week to our normal routine, my mom yelling that we would be late. We would take a shower (if necessary) and get dressed so-o on.

My mom dropped us all off at our different schools and picked us up when school let out at the end of the day.

She was always there at the front of the line trying her hardest to get us on time, even if she had to leave work early.

We would go home and start to pack for our week-long trip. Go to sleep… Wake up and repeat, do it over and over.

Part: 2

All my life, I have wanted to be popular and walk alongside the great Alexandria.

She was my idol, even though she was a total bitch. I loved everything about her, her name – Lexy Michaels –

her dark black hair flowed as swiftly as she walked, her sea-green eyes, which were one of the many things that attracted boys to her. But she also had a weakness: she is not very loyal.

She has the perfect girlfriend though - Naddalin. I not sure if you know her or not I do not even…

I also wore a lot of skinny jeans and made sure to tug my shirt down to make it look good on me.

My eyes were cute, but now because of my dark-framed and thickly rimmed glasses, you could hardly tell anymore.

Ah, Naddalin, you see she the school's top girl in all that is magic.

There is not a single girl in this school who does not love her, all of them would be willing to kill each other for a least a touch – I included.

She was my one true love; it does not matter to me if she did not feel the same way, if he existed that was fine by me.

So-o anyway, back to me, I, was a loner all my life, kind of like you but not.

A little more emo, not too tough, and not too weak. I had very few

friends, most likely none, except for one.

Well, I would not say that he was my friend though. This girl was my childhood friend too even if we never played together, and neighbor ever since I moved here from South Greensboro, part of the city back home, when I was only one and a half years old.

But then, now she is such a jerk to me, it is so hard to believe that she had a thing for me when we were five!

Now she barely talks to me and whenever I come near her, she just pushes me away.

Why?

I do not have any parents so-o I have been living with the Davilles's for a few years now.

I was not comfortable with calling them mom and dad, so-o, I just called them Abby and Pat.

I do not really know what happened to my real- mom and dad, but I just woke up one day and they were not there.

I panicked at first, but then after her parents took me, I soon started to forget it ever happened.

Sure, Emma and Ariana were nice and got me everything, you know Emma, don't you?

'Yes, really well- I's may say…'

I ever-ever wanted, if you include a cell phone and an iPod, but- I still did not feel close to them.

I wasn't incredibly happy with anyone in Greensburg Pa., not 'till I came here.

Like- I said before, I was not emo, but with every day and all its

problems, I became increasingly like that. I never cut myself through- as Ariana did...

‘One day,’ I told myself. ‘One day, they’re all going to go too far and that’ll be the end of me.’

But I never knew that…

That day would be tomorrow.

I got the idea when I was reading a little bit of this manga called:

‘The Lost Girl’ is about a girl who is picked on by kids at school, got rejected by her one true love, and her childhood friend’s a jerk to her now.

So, she decides to hang herself but fails due to her heavyweight, which then causes her to find this medicine.

But- but this medicine is not like ordinary medicine, this medicine has the power to change your appearance to the way you want it to be.

Until the Friday before.

I got a call from my best friend Jessica. She asked if I wanted to spend the night.

I told her we were leaving the next morning really- early and that I would not be able to.

Of course, we both were disappointed. What girl is not?

So, we planned, so I would be able to go. The plan was to finish all my packing that night (which was already done,) and put it all in the car. Then get dropped off at her house and spend the night.

On my parent’s way to the campground the next morning, they could pick me up since it was only a few minutes out of the way.

After begging for almost- five minutes my mom and dad agreed.

Part: 3

So, it was settled, I packed everything, I would need for the trip in the car and after a zillion reminder about what not to forget, I finally got my overnight bag packed, for my first day back…

I got in the car and my dad drives me to Yessa's house, a girl I knew back home.

She made sure that I knew I would be picked up at six o’clock a.m.

because we had a long drive ahead of us to the train station.

I told her I knew so she left. I did not even say good-bye. Sometimes,

I think that if I would have said good-bye things would have turned out differently.

But- I did not.

The night went by like any sleepover.

Late-night prank calls, popcorn and movies, painting toenails, and trying to see how long we could stay up.

I crashed around one o’clock a.m. after setting the alarm on my cell phone.

The next morning, I was outside waiting at six o’clock sharp.

I sat there for two hours, dozing off every few minutes and checking the time on my phone the few times, I was actually- awake before, I started crying.

I knew something was wrong. My dad was never late, my mom would have called.

I must have woken up Jess and her mom with my loud crying.

I only had to wait another hour before the police showed up. They both sat with me outside on the steps. I listened to the wind that flew past me. It almost called my name.

‘Taylor. Taylor- Tay-a.’ I closed my eyes, listening carefully. It was definitely- calling me now. ‘Taylor. Taylor.’ It almost started to sound annoyed. Whatever, I was enjoying this way too much to care.

‘Oh, right, um, x- equals two-hundred ninety-one and three tenths.’

I answered absentmindedly. She looked shocked the whole class did. Then I realized what I said and was shocked myself, I had no idea what she even asked.

‘TAYLOR!!’

My eyes snapped open, only I was not in the sky anymore. Mrs. Jenison the professor, my Algebra teacher was in front of me, looking very, very furious.

‘Welcome back, Ms. Svernight, so nice you could join us,’ sarcasm was apparent in her voice.

Yes, she was livid. ‘Now perhaps you would be so kind as to answer my question?’

Mrs. Jentson moved to the chalkboard and wrote some notes we needed to copy down, with the chalk floating in midair, she was using

telekinesis charming it to do so, in perfect penmanship.

I started to copy them, but then I started to stare out the window, drifting back into a daydream. (What we are studying right now… you with me.)

The sound of the bell ringing brought me out of it- this time.

I said- what I needed… she even read my mind… so in a way, it was all said without me saying anything at all.

‘Yes, that is correct, but that doesn’t give you a pass to daydream again.

Pay attention.’ she said, still amazed at what I did. I nodded knowing that I would not listen to her.

I scrambled to get my stuff together and ran out the door.

Part: 4

When I got to my locker Sarcelles Handsome, my best friend, was already there.

Well, she was at her locker, but it is right next to mine. I shoved my Algebra book in my locker and grabbed

my Biology notes and book. My locker door closed, and Sarcelles slid in front of it, and me.

‘So, what was it this time? Swimming? Running? Princess? Elves?’ She asked.

Okay, I will admit it; I have a bit of imagination. ‘Flying, it was so real.

I could feel the wind in my hair.’ ‘Was I there?’ She asked, jumping up and down.

She loves to hear about my daydreams- and regular ones too-and always want to be a part of one. Even

before I got here but, it is kind of like I have no control over them, I knew that my days were coming up to where I would be here.

‘Oh, um, yes.’ I lied, unconvincingly.

‘Don’t lie to me,’ she said, her crestfallen with her breath left out.

‘You’re ad at it.’

‘I’m sorry. But I did feel your presence.’ That was not a lie at least. I did feel the presence of someone or something. It was Mell short for Mellany. At least, I hope it was.

‘Seriously?’

I felt faint in the head.

I only heard snatches of what officer Barkly was telling me.

‘Car crash... All then... Instantly... Without pain...

Arrangements... Next week... I was alive yet not.’

But I stopped listening, to the thoughts... I knew everything I needed to know.

How could my family have all died? Then it hit me that I would be coming here and that I have more than one life, on Earth, yet I would have to have approval as a fallen girl.

I got my answer in a moment... It was because of me. I was selfish to want to go to a friend's house the night before our family trip.

This was my punishment from God. Finally, tears started to fall down my face, that I was so bad that I would be sent here, not knowing.

I thought of my dad, the last of my family I had seen. The one who always made Chad stop bothering me. Whose idea it was to go camping.

I thought of my mom. The kindest person in the world. Always putting others before herself. Always

there for me when I needed her, giving me hugs on bad days.

I thought of Chad… Even though he was a bully at home he always stood up for me at school whenever someone was picking on me.

He was only eighteen. He had just gotten his first serious girlfriend.

A late curfew, a Credit Card!!! I also knew about the car my parents were going to surprise him with on his birthday.

Now he would never get to drive someone to the movies in his car.

Never get to make stupid mistakes and learn the lesson.

I thought of Daniel… How he was always trying to act like Chad… older.

Even though he was only ten years old and still a kid at heart. He had just gotten his first real crush on a little girl I am sure liked him back.

Always annoying me to get my attention. Doing whatever I say so I would play basketball with him. Or play catch in the backyard.

I thought of Dean… too- Just starting school. Just making friends.

Just starting to read. Just starting to live life at only six.

He had just gotten a book he could not put down. I had read it to him every night.

He was mad because I was gone and would not be able to read to him.

He only let me read to him because I used different voices foot the different characters. Still sucking his thumb every night. Practically- still a baby.

Part: 5

I thought of baby Hannah. My first, only, and the last sister I will ever have. She will never have a chance to make friends. (All over me, and that is why I choose to come here…)

Never go to school like the ‘big kids.’

Never have a boyfriend, I will never have the chance to do big sister stuff with her.

Like doing her toes, braiding her hair, or just talking. She will never grow up.

None of them will… All because of me, so I had to come here with you

girls- and be one of these girls- I had no choice but to.

I looked up at the sky towards heaven, saying no I do not belong there for all that is WRONG with me always so many types of the wrong I am.

‘I’m thinking of you’ I said, ‘I’m thinking of you… you don’t need me up there with you- I have fallen.’

~*~

‘Yeah, oh, hey, could I borrow your Algebra notes? I started daydreaming after the first section.’ I pulled out my notes and showed her.

‘What are you talking about? These are even better than mine. See…?’ She said flipping through pages in my notebook. I looked and saw two pages of notes, all in perfect order.

‘But I… how…?’ I managed to stutter out, amazed.

‘I don’t know, but we better get to class. Don’t you?’ we hurried of too-Biology, then we parted ways and I went off to World History, Study Hall, and Free Period all flew by in daydreams. Eventually, I went home and did at least, I did my homework. It was done either way.

I was daydreaming about flying again when my mom called me. I went downstairs to see what she wanted. She was getting off her cell phone and was typing something on her laptop. She did not even look up when I came into her study.

'That was your Algebra teacher- I just got off the phone with.'

'Oh.'

'She says you are very bright but don't seem to be focusing. That you are daydreaming?

What is going on, Taylor? I thought you said you were going to quit

this daydreaming nonsense. Was that not what you said, or was I mistaken?'

Part: 6

'It isn't nonsense, it's-'

'Don't start with me, young lady. You know as well as I do, that it is nonsense. I did not spend all that money to send you to the best private school in the state, just for you to ruin it by daydreaming.

Now, get your head out of the clouds, and think about your future. Because, if you do not nip this in the butt, you will not have one. Do you

understand…?’ I nodded. ‘Good, now, do your homework.’

‘I already did.’

‘Then do... I don’t care, just do something that doesn’t involve daydreaming.’

‘Okay, bye.’ I left her typing away on her computer and dialing someone on her cell. Knowing I would not stop daydreaming. It was my release, she just does not get it, refuses to understand.

So, busy working and focusing on ‘the future’ she forgets everything else and does not care about it either.

I went back to my room and started to clean it. I threw my backpack on my unmade bed and started organizing my books. About halfway through, I started to daydream again. I pulled a nearby book to me and opened it to a random page, so my mom would just think I was reading if she checked on me.

Probably- like the worst state to live in, or so I have been told. Cold, dreary, wet. My aunt Monica loves this place and my mother loved Pa.

Complete opposites.

Which is why they never got along well. I have only seen Aunt

Monica about five times and both times ended in a huge fight and someone leaving and promising never to talk to the other again.

Mom told me that when they were young, they were the best of friends. they were only a year apart and did anything together.

But then high school came and went. They fought and went their separate ways. Now I am expected to go live with her and her children in a tiny town named Bluewater. I hate it already. Plus, I must fly there.

It has been a week since the accident and I am at the Washington

airport. And there is nobody to take me to my aunt’s house.

I have been off the plane for an hour and there is no one to pick me up!

I have tried calling my aunt and calling her house, but nobody answered either. I went to the bathroom to freshen up a bit and when I came back out my cell rang. I answered, and I heard my aunt's apologetic voice.

‘I’m so sorry Lucy I’m running a bit late. My son Jack fell off his dirt bike and broke his arm, so we are at the hospital. I am having one of my oldest son’s friends who is our neighbor

come to pick you up. He should be there now.' I was mad. I guess just in general but her forgetting me just set it off.

'Fine' I said and hung up. That probably- was not the smartest idea since I still had no idea who was picking me up. Or what they looked like.

A few minutes later a boy came up to me.

'Hey, I'm Brendon' I just looked at him.

'Hello, Brendon…' He was cute. His deep brown hair partially

covered his face and he had piercing blue eyes.

I was an average looking girl. I had long curly black hair and grey eyes and a tan that I had all year long.

I was not the tallest person ever, but I was not that short either. Brendon was tall though. Was he who was picking me up? I had no idea. While he stood there, I stared him down. He looked nice enough.

Part: 7

‘Um-mm… ‘he seemed a little uncomfortable with me not knowing

who he was. ‘I’m supposed to be picking you up?’ I nodded and stood.

I grabbed my duffel bag and purse and waited for him to lead the way.

He looked a little confused but just kept walking. He showed me the way to his black truck. He grabbed my stuff from me and put it in the back I got into the passenger seat. I started to panic but took deep breaths and tried to calm down.

This would be the last time I rode in a car. We drove in silence for a few minutes before he finally said his confusion.

‘I could tell you had no idea who I was, but why did you just accept it and get into my car? I could be some creeper who wanted to rape a girl.

But you didn’t even question me like What is my aunt's name?

Or why are you coming to pick me up? Anything’ I just looked up from my lap- ‘Are you some rapper?’ He shook his head ‘Then why is there a problem?’ He sighed and just kept driving. The truth was I just did not care who he was.

If it were some murderer trying to kill me I probably- would be happy about it. About ten minutes later he

pulled up to a house. It looked normal enough.

It was a three-story building with blue shutters and yellow paint.

‘This is where you get off’ Brendon said and smiled at me. I ignored him. It started to rain so I ran with my bags towards the house.

I was so glad to be out of the car, but he did not need to know that. ‘Do you need any help with that?’ Brendon asked. I shook my head. He pointed to a house next to where we were- parked.

‘That is my house, I take Landon to school and you are in the same grade, so I’ll be taking you too so be ready on Monday at eight- sharp!’

He mocks saluted and got back in his car. ‘You’re welcome!’ He yelled while pulling away. All he got in response was me rolling my eyes.

I took a deep breath and looked at the house I was supposed to live in with my Aunt Monica maiden the last name was- Read and five cousins- one a girl has dated the youngest girl -Alyssa Amsel great-grandchild also a girl, Charlotte Mazel Amsel, who was said to be bloodline to Nevaeh, by DNA genetic

profiling of embryos implanting stolen from her- when Nevaeh was just a 13-year girl by them the four girls known as Amsel sisters, many years before.

There was also a Taylor, how would be Nevaeh's eggs inside AVA, with DNA from both to make a designer baby of AVA's liking- I am sure my uncle died of cancer a couple of years ago yet not. Or it was a car accident, I do not know. One way or another AVA got her way...

I have met all my cousins before- yet I just do not remember, but that was about three years ago. Most if not all are in Landon of all places, the

oldest being my age around, 17, maybe a few months older. He was a jerk to me the last time we met. Always called me names- over the swirl baby concept thing that made me- well me.

Hopefully, he has changed- yet most boys are dumb. Daphne is two years younger than me so she is around fourteen. She was also a brat when I met her. Emily is about right now. She was so sweet and funny, she is the only one I am looking forward to seeing. Lastly the twins Coly and Joly. Loud, crazy, wild children. They should be five now. They have calmed down a bit? I can only hope. I can remember that

they all had curly black hair like me because their mom and my mom looked a lot alike. But they had blue eyes, except one of the twins has brown eyes. But other than that, I have no idea what to expect. I have changed a lot in the past three years. Looks-wise mostly. Now boys notice me. If I can change hopefully others can too.

Part: 8

I was standing in a courtyard, with snow falling all around me. I was wearing a pure white halter dress, barefoot. Cherry blossoms mixed with the snow. Frozen cherry blossoms were in my hair, which fell over my wings.

I tested my wings gingerly, afraid they would disappear-although they never did. I started flying, higher than I thought possible. I could see everything around me, it was beautiful. I spun around a couple of times, just for fun, arms out, and something incredible happened. Some of the snow that was falling melted and the water followed my outstretched arms. I stopped spinning and stared. I lowered my arms and the water started to fall. I raised my arms quickly, while practically yelling ‘Freeze.’ And, get this, the water froze. I am talking frozen, like ice.

I lowered my arms again, this time mentally telling the water to stay put. And it did; I started experimenting, moving my arms around, giving both mental and verbal commands, and just playing around.

‘Well, at least you can follow my orders… For once.’ The voice was cold as steel, heartless, snapped me out of my daydream, and was my mother’s. I stared at her confused. Happy she thought I was reading. ‘I should let you get back to work, shouldn’t I?’ I nodded, unsure what she was talking about, but I did not care. I watched her

leave then flew myself onto my made bed, sending stuffed animals flying.

I looked up amazed; my room was completely clean. I had no idea how that happened. I was not that freaked out, though-but I should have been. I was simply happy it was clean. I looked at the alarm clock on my bed stand, eight-thirty p.m., I was shocked. It was only six when I started.

I finished cleaning my room and was completely exhausted. I got ready for bed. I laid down and promptly fell asleep.

I was back in the courtyard, but everything was different. I was in

the same clothes, but the snow and cherry blossoms were gone, and everything looked dead. I felt something behind me and abruptly turned around. Nothing was there. I turned back around. I started to fly, but this time it was rough and hard. I felt someone watching me again. I started moving away but it followed me. I was getting freaked out now.

Everywhere I went the feeling followed, sometimes getting stronger, but never died down. Suddenly my wings disappeared. I started screaming as I plummeted to the ground. This is no ordinary dream, I thought, not

knowing whether falling here would kill me or not. I was about to find out. I let out one last blood-curdling scream before I hit the ground.

I woke up in my bed gasping for air. Afraid to fall asleep again.

'I'm telling you; it was so creepy.' I was talking to Mell the next day in Algebra.

'I'm sure it was. But it is weird that you knew it was a dream, why were you so scared?'

'I told you I had no control over anything that happened,' I said, stifling a yawn. I stayed awake the rest of the

night except for the occasional doze-awake and was now paying the price. I already fell asleep in English, and then I said that I like football when my teacher asked for the date during Spanish. I was beyond exhausted. I was having trouble keeping my head up now, and class has not even started yet.

‘Are you sure you are telling me everything?’

‘Yeah, but I did have another daydream beforehand that made it even creepier.’ Mell’s head shot up and she gave me a weird look.

I walked up to the front door and knocked three times. I only had to

wait a few seconds until a young girl I am guessing was Emily opened the door.

‘Mom Lucy is here!’ Then she slammed the door in my face. I almost laughed but then I remembered why I was here and shut up. I started to think of my sister and how much I miss her. I toughed it out and dried my eyes. I just waited and after smiled at her, a few minutes my Aunt Monica opens the door.

‘Sorry about that sweetie, come on in!’ She gives me a big hug which I do not return. She reminds me so much of my mom it hurts. The same

hair, eyes, and smile. I looked away from her face and stepped inside still not talking to her. I hear the hurt in her voice when she talks next but chose to ignore it.

'Emily honey will you show Lucy to her room while I call the school to set her up for Monday?' Emily skips up and takes hold of my hand that is not holding my bag.

'Come on Lucy!' I almost start crying when I hear the name my mom used to call me when she was in a good mood. I hold back though and let Emily guide me through the house. I go up a flight of stairs and my room is the last

one on the right. Emily takes me to it but does not take me in yet. She points to each room in turn.

‘This is your room and my room is- a-crossed the hall. Mommy is downstairs and so is- Colton and Joly.

The room next to you is Landon and Daphne is next to mine.’

Then she pulls me inside my new room. Plain white. Desk. Computer. Chair. Closet. Dresser. TV. ‘Mommy said you could paint it later and that I could help maybe’ I sit on my bed.

‘Bye!’ Emily called and raced out of the room. Good. I thought I cannot bear to be around people now. I hear music coming from the room next to mine and try to remember who is in there. Landon, that explains it. I hear thumping up the stairs and somebody else goes into Landon's room. I can hear them talking. I start to unpack but give up and call Jess… ‘So-o, how’s the place’ She askes

I shrug then remember she cannot see me. ‘Rain, rain, and rain. I haven’t even met much of them yet!’ I told her what happened at the airport.

‘Is he hot?’ She asked-

‘I guess I didn’t notice’ But I had. It was really, hot. I did not tell her that.

‘I miss you, Lucy.’

‘I miss you too’ We hung up soon and I finished unpacking the little I had with me. I changed into some short shorts and a loose comfortable shirt. I look at my phone. This was usually the time I would be spending time together with friends at Mark’s Coffee Shop. It is a Saturday night.

I have seven new text messages from various people, but I had only talked to Jess since the

accident and chose to ignore everyone else.

Three are from Justin (I was a boyfriend,) one from Kim (The girl trying to steal Justin from me,) one from Victoria (The girl who was with my ex when we were still dating), and two from Tyler (My ex-boyfriend.)

Wow how Empathetic, I have no loyal friends except Jess. Figures since I am such a horrible person. I delete them all and lay back down on my bed. I grab a book and read until a hear a knock on my door.

‘Dinner’ Says a voice I do not know. I slowly stand up and open the

door. I hear a lot of movement from downstairs and I slowly go down the stairs. There are a lot of people in the kitchen. Monica, Emily, Daphne, Joly, Colton, and about five teenagers.

They are attacking a pizza, well maybe three, in the middle of the kitchen. I recognize Brendon in the pack. As I walk in, they stare at me until another boy laughs and tells them to stop staring.

I am guessing that was Landon because he looks familiar. But he is changed. He does not look so nerdy anymore. It seems more of the popular

type with his good looks, his friends too. Aunt Monica steps forward.

‘Hey honey these are some of Landon's friends, Austin, Gabe, Kendal, and you’ve already met Brendon of course.’ I nodded at them and grabbed some pizza because, after a full day of travel, I was hungry.

The boys kept talking but quieter this time, so I could not hear. But they kept glancing at me. I wonder what they were talking about.

Seriously. I ignored Daphne when she tried to start a conversation.

After one slice, I was done with it and just slid back upstairs. A few minutes later I heard all the boys go into Landon’s room. They seemed to be playing X box or something. I heard a knock on my door and when I opened it Emily stood there with two slices of pizza.

‘Mommy said I should bring you another pizza because the boys made you uncomfortable and, so I bought myself one too, so you don’t have to be alone.’ I smiled at her and we ate while I played the game favorites with her.

She left when Aunt Monica called her downstairs. around nine-thirty the boys left, and I went to sleep and had terrible nightmares. I woke up crying and could not fall back asleep. The clock read 7:44 a.m. Early for a weekend. At least for my family. Well, when I lived with my parents.

So, I got up and changed into running clothes. My only release. I pulled my hair back and went downstairs and left a note on the counter that said-

‘Going out running will be back in an hour’ I took off into the morning. I ran through the country not wanting to

get people's attention in town. Not that there were many people in this town. My old town in PA had triple the population of Bluewater.

Blah- blah- I went about eight miles. As I got back to the house, I saw Landon and Brendon in the yard playing with the other kids and I am guessing Brendon's siblings. They all waved to me and I just ran past them and went into the house.

'How was the run?' Monica asked. I shrugged. 'Cold' She sighed tired of my one-word responses. 'You know you can talk to me, right?'

I nodded and headed upstairs to take a shower. All-day I just watched TV in my room and ignored everyone who knocked on my door, except Emily who already had me loving her. Even Landon tried to get me out of my room.

'Hey Lucy, a bunch of the guys are going to the movies, want to come?' I called out no and watched TV some more, trying to forget my life. I went to bed early dreading school the next day. They will all find out about my family and give me the look that says they feel sorry for me. I hate that. I will not tell and they will not find out. Not that I will make any close enough friends tell

my secret to. That I was the reason my family was dead.

The next morning, I woke early around six and took a shower, and began to get ready. I dried my hair and put on makeup like a pro. Jess's mom owned a shop that did hair and makeup and she taught Jess and me well. I checked the computer that said today was supposed to be warm, so I put on my favorite pair of jean shorts. Much too small for the dress code back home but here it was not so bad. I also wore a white tank and red off the shoulder shirt I had just gotten a few weeks ago and never worn.

My high tops finished the outfit. It was only seven, so I sat down and authored an email to Jess telling her about my first-day outfit, a tradition we made up in third grade and promised to tell her all about my first day at my new school. It was not her first day, but we were acting like it, so I read her email.

-Hey Looloo, I decided to wear the shorts we bought together last month, you know the silver short ones? Plus, a navy-blue tank and a white shirt. The cute bouncy one that you love so much. Just for you sweetie! You know what shoes of course. Converse

all the way baby! Hair is curled to look just like yours even though it looks a lot better on you. Just missing you. Do not forget the bracelet! Wear it always and I will too! Talk to ya later and do not forget to send me your outfit!

Love, ~Jess-

~*~

We had bought a bracelet together the day before I left, and I had not taken it off since. It reminded me of my family and my always best friend. I looked at the clock surprised at how much time had passed. It was time to go to school. It is their first day back from spring break too so maybe I will

not stand out so much. Landon knocked on my door.

‘Come downstairs I know you’ve been ready for hours!’ I took a deep breath. There was no way I was riding in a car, only if I was driving. I do not care how well anyone thinks they drive; my dad was forty-two and he still could not drive perfectly. And if he could not, nobody could.

Plus, I do not trust anyone here with my life yet. I walked downstairs and prepared to talk to my aunt with more than one word for the first time since I got here. She was in the kitchen

making Emily and the little boy's breakfast.

‘Good morning Lucy would you like some eggs?’ I shook my head and started to talk.

‘Would it be okay if I walked to school today?’ She looked confused.

‘I thought Brendon was taking you and Landon to school?’ I shrugged.

‘Yeah but I don’t want to be in a car right now, I’d rather walk.’ She realized what I was talking about and almost started to cry.

‘Yeah whatever you want, you don’t have to do anything that makes

you uncomfortable.’ I said thanks and grabbed my bag with all the stuff Monica had gotten for me for school. I already knew the way to the school; it was only about a half-mile away anyway when Landon saw me start to walk, he called out.

‘Hey, I thought we were giving you a ride Lucy!’ I shook my head.

‘I don’t like cars that much!’ I yelled back. I say understanding comes into his eyes and I also saw Brendon looking concerned too.

I just set off towards school ready to face hell.

‘How so?’

‘Well-’

‘Alright, it is time to start class. Ms. Evernight, Ms. Hedsome, do you mind?’ Mrs. Jenson walked in.

‘I’ll tell you later,’ I told Mell. She started to say something more but stopped. I went to my seat and started doodling in my notebook.

I could not concentrate on anything Mrs. Jenson was saying. I just wanted to sleep. I closed my eyes, but opened them shortly afterward, because, I heard someone enter the classroom.

I looked up and could not believe my eyes. Standing in front of us was pure perfection. He looked about twenty-five, was tall, but not too tall.

His deep brown hair fell into his gray eyes. He had a muscular build, but not insanely so. I just sat there, mouth wide open, just like everyone else in the classroom. That is, except for Mrs. Jenson and Mell, they both looked worried and frightened.

‘I’m looking for a princess. ‘Umm- his voice, while a little rough, was perfect. Everyone turned to the newest girl in the class, Mary Stenting. She transferred to our school about two

months ago, so no one knew anything about her. But, since everyone else always went to this school, everyone automatically thought it was her.

She stood up, a knowing smile on her face. Then the unimaginable happened. She pointed directly at me and said, ‘Her.’

A few things happened at once. The stranger’s whole demeanor changed, into something deadly. He started advancing on me. Then a desk flew, hitting him directly in the head, sending him flying into the wall. I stood there shocked, all I could think was, what is going on.

Someone grabbed my wrist and started running, dragging me along with them. My eyes never left the man until we were out of the classroom. I finally looked at the person dragging me. It was Mell. Her eyes are both frightened and determined. She started running even faster and I struggled to keep up. I had no idea she was that fast.

'We have to get out of here. Now…' We ran down the hall, unsure if he was pursuing or not. We flew out the doors of the school, never slowing down. We kept running-which reminds me, never try to run in a skirt (why

private school uniforms for girls always involve a plaid, pleated skirt is beyond me,) until we were near her house.

She pulled me into a bush while she was searching for something. I could see the urgency in her eyes. I, however, was still very confused.

‘What is going on? Mell?’ I whispered, afraid about what would happen if I spoke any louder.

‘They knew we’d be coming here. We have to go straight to Skoufyceol’s.’

‘Wait. What? Mell, I do not understand, what is going on? What is

Skoufyceol's? Why did that guy think I was a princess?' My voice rising out of fear cracked at the last question. I was so confused that if you would have asked me as simple a question as my name, I would not have known it.

'Sh-h. You do not want them to hear. I will explain everything later. Right now, I need to get you out of here.' I nodded. She crept out of the bushes and I followed, as quietly as possible.

We went to the woods on the outskirts of town. I had no idea where we were going, but Mell did not seem to have that problem. She seemed to

know exactly where we were. We went deeper and deeper into the woods.

After about thirty minutes, Mell stopped dead in her tracks and turned around. Suddenly I became aware of someone running towards us. The man from the classroom burst through the trees. He started advancing on us as Mell went into a defensive position.

I watched in absolute horror as my best friend fought this man. While she was incredible, there was something about her opponent that made me fear for her life. I was so worried about her I did not even notice

the footsteps coming up behind me until it was too late.

Another man grabbed me from behind, and before I could do anything, he was dragging me away. I started struggling and trying to break free of his grip. Then someone rammed into him.

He let go of me, but in the process, he threw me into a tree. My left side hit it with deadly accuracy and force. I fell to the ground, whimpering in pain. I did not dare open my eyes.

Part: 9

Eventually, however, I had to. When I did, black spots clouding my vision. They cleared up and I saw Mell fighting both men. She had the upper hand for the moment, but something inside of me made me want to help her. I sat up, wincing at the horrible pain.

I did not dare look down because I knew that if I did, I would scream. I stood up, almost passing out in the process, and gingerly took a few steps forward. I slowly took a few steps forward, until I was right behind Mell.

She had just taken down one of the men and was fighting with the other. I had never seen anyone fight as

hard as she was. The fierce determination was the only emotion on her face. I was both afraid of and for my friend.

Then, Mell somehow threw the man. He went flying past me and into a tree, head-on. I caught some movement out of the corner of my eye and turned. Just in time to see a woman attack me.

I tried to defend myself but was too weak from my other wound to do any good. She managed to get a good blow on my head. Then for the first time in my life, I passed out, praying that this was just a dream. But in the

back of my head, I knew it was not, and that this was just the beginning.

I woke up on a small cot covered in blankets. My whole body ached. I had no idea what time it was, or even what day it was. The ‘room’ I was in, looked nothing more than a hole from an adjoining tunnel of dirt-which is what it was. I sat up and nearly passed out again, the pain was horrible. But I managed to sit up and look around.

The walls were made from dirt and the ceiling, while high, made me feel extremely uncomfortable, because it was made from the same dirt, and I

had no idea how stable it was. The floor was covered in rugs, so I do not know what it was, but I am guessing that it was dirt.

The door was just a blanket hung over a rod. There was another cot, but it was unoccupied. A small table and a few chairs sat in the far-left corner, with a jug of water, some cups, and plates on top. A chest was in the nearest right-hand corner.

My clothes were hanging limply around me. My shirt was in tatters and covered in bloodstains. There was an especially horrible spot

on my left side that I am guessing was from hitting the tree.

I could not see the wound because it was bandaged, but the gauze and bandages were red there. I threw back my covers and examined the rest of my body.

My skirt had nothing seriously wrong with it. It was just a little wrinkled, with a few rips, tears, and bloodstains here and there. My legs just had a bunch of cuts and bruises, but nothing a serious as my side. My socks were now a lovely shade of yellowish, brownish white.

I started to rub my forehead. But stopped dead in my tracks. On my left wrist was a tattoo. It looked exactly like the friendship bracelets Mell and I got each other in third grade. The design of swirls, well, swirled around my wrist-I know stupid, but that is the only way I can describe it.

It was a sapphire color that almost seemed to glow. I stared at it, confused. I never got a tattoo, and I was not planning to get one, either.

I got out of bed, hoping to find some answers-I finally convinced myself that I had fallen asleep and that this was just a dream.

I was still very weak, so I was using the walls to keep myself somewhat-steady. I left the room and started creeping down the hall. Many people were walking through the hallways. They gave me strange looks but otherwise left me alone.

I kept walking, not knowing where I was going. I was feeling weaker and weaker with every step. I was about to ask someone passing by when I heard two people yelling at each other from a room ahead. I stopped dead in my tracks, not because I was scared, but because, I knew those voices.

‘Just what was I supposed to do?’ Mell’s voice cut through the air. She was furious. I crept forward, wanting to get a closer look. I was about to the doorway, so I peered in.

Mrs. Jenson and Mell were standing in the middle of the room. Mell had her back to me and Mrs. Jenson was too focused on Mell to notice me. I involuntarily took a step back. It was not that they were there, I figured it was just part of the dream. It was what Mell looked like. She looked about the same, as always. A few cuts and bruises now, but otherwise the same. That is if you do not count the

wings that flowed off her back. Her hair covered where the wings were attached to her body, but I was certain that they were real. The design on them looked like twigs.

'You know very well what you were supposed to do. You were supposed to make sure that this would not happen.

You were supposed to make sure the area was secure before you came here. You were not supposed to come here at all. You should be at Skoufyceol's,' Mrs. Jenson spoke in an icy tone I had never heard before another shock because I have had to

see her so many times, I had heard just about every tone possible, or so I thought.

Again, I heard the name Skoufyceol's and I was dying to know just what it was.

'You know just as well as I do, that was impossible at the time,' Mell had as much ice in her voice as Mrs. Jentson's did.

'No. It was not impossible, you are just too lazy to think of any other options.' Mell went rigid.

'Don't you dare say I was too lazy! You know just as well as I do that

it was not that simple. That even if I made sure the area was secure, they would have found away. They always do. And anyway, she is alive, that is all that matters.'

'Yes, she is alive barely, however, if you had done what you were supposed to, you wouldn't even have to worry about that. If I was her

Protector this wouldn't of-happened, and she'd be at Skoufyceol's.'

'But you aren't her Protector, I am,' She held up her left wrist, and the same tattoo was on it. It gave off a faint glow. I looked at mine, it was also

glowing. ‘Now, if you will excuse me, I am going to check my Charge.’ Her voice was full of ice, and I was shocked. Mell was never disrespectful to anyone, let alone a teacher.

I went back to my room after that. I had heard enough and something in the back of my mind was telling me that I was her Charge and that I should get back to my room, before her. I had just crept into my room and sat on the bed; afraid I was going to pass out when Mell walked in.

‘Oh, good, you’re awake. How are you feeling?’ I stared at her. This is the person who just yelled at our

teacher? She was looking at me with genuine concern.

‘Fine. A little sore.’ She laughed, and I could not shake the feeling that something was different about her. She looked the same.

Same dress-another shock, Mell does not usually wear dresses, but this one was super cute, so I understood why she was wearing it-same hair, the same everything, but still, something was different.

Part: 10

‘I’ll bet. You had us very worried. But, I’m glad to see you are

okay.’ She brushed some hair out of her face, and I knew what was bothering me. Her tattoo was not there.

‘Who… who are you?’ I stuttered out.

‘I’m Sarceeala, silly.’ She laughed, but I could tell she was nervous, or something.

‘No, you’re not. Where is your tattoo?’ I asked, courage rising inside of me. Suddenly, the impostor looked deadly and worried.

‘What…? How…!

…?…

You aren’t supposed to know!’ She shouted; her voice distorted with rage. Suddenly, hazel eyes turned into a cat-like green. Her wavy chestnut hair into a sleek, straight black. She gave me a feral smile.

She shot at me and threw me into the chest. Clothes burst out. She came to me again-man she was fast-but was thrown back, just before she reached me. I had closed my eyes, bracing for another attack, but opened them when I heard the impostor shriek. Mell-the real one-was standing in front of me, her tattoo was glowing brighter than before.

I looked at my wrist and saw it was also glowing so bright that it could have lit the entire room.

The impostor and Mell were fighting again and I noticed her hair was changing back. Suddenly, the two stopped fighting and appeared to be at a stalemate. I could not tell who was who. The impostor changed back into Mell. They looked at each other, then at me.

‘Taylor,’ they both spoke at the same time, and I had no idea which was the real Mell, they both had tattoos this time. ‘Don’t listen to her. I’m the real Mell.’

I stared at them both, sure that there was some way to tell the two apart, there was not. One of them came close to me. Then the other jumped from behind and somehow got behind me. She drew a knife to my throat and changed back into the impostor.

‘Listen to me. I’m going to walk out of here with the princess and you are not going to try and stop me.’ Her voice changed. It now seemed wild and crazy. Mell looked at me helplessly. I started searching for something I could use to my advantage.

My eyes stopped on the jug of water, and I remembered my other

daydream. I figured that if it worked once in a dream, then it should work again.

I mentally yelled at the water to attack her. I to look as nonchalant as possible, and, it worked. Water came hurtling towards the impostor. It hit her with such force she flew into the wall. Not wanting to miss the opportunity, in one fluid motion, I spun around, shooting all the water at her. Without hesitating, I froze it. But, for some reason, there were at least three times as much water than there should have been in the jug. But it did not matter, her head was the only thing

that did not have some ice on it, so we were safe.

‘But you’re not supposed to… There is no way… Who are you?’ The impostor was yelling at us. Just then Mrs. Jenson strode in a worried expression on her face.

‘Sarceeala, I have just received word that Ailina has… ‘she just noticed the impostor, Ailina and then stared at me and Mell.

‘Thank you, but you probably could have told me earlier,’ Mell said

dryly. Mrs. Jenson was still staring at Ailina.

‘How…?’

‘That is what I want to know too. Taylor, how did you know what you could do with the water?’

‘Well, from that daydream I told you about or was going to. I figured that if I could do it once in a dream,’ I shrugged. ‘I mean, there is no way that this isn’t a dream. Oh, you are going to be so happy you are in one of my daydreams for once, although it is kind of creepy to have you in here Mrs. Jenson, I mean no offense to you, but you are my teacher.’

‘You mean I never was before?’ She did not look disappointed, just worried, and I saw her and Mrs. Jenson exchange a worried look. I shook my head.

‘No, but you were always so upset when you weren’t.’

‘But what about that daydream you had the other day when you said you felt my presence?’ I shook my head again.

‘No, it didn’t feel like you, but you were so upset that I said it was. What?’ Mrs. Jenson stepped forward.

‘Taylor, I don’t know how to put this gently, but this isn’t a dream. This is real.’

‘No, it can’t be. There is no such thing as, well, whatever it is I just did. People do not have wings. They just don’t.’ I refused to listen to what they were saying.

‘It’s true, Tay. This is real.’

‘But… No, this is not real. The bell will ring soon, or you will ask me some questions, and I will wake up. I know I will.’ But the thing was, I knew I would not. I just could not accept it yet.

‘Taylor, I know this might be hard for you to understand, but the world you thought you knew just isn’t the same.’ Mrs. Jenson put her hand on my shoulder and I winced. The pain in my side was back with vengeance.

I suddenly took a few steps back, realizing something. I had never felt pain in any dream before. In all the dreams I have ever had, no matter what happened, I was never hurt. Not once. It is impossible.

‘T-this is real, isn’t it?’ I said. They both nodded.

‘Taylor, are you okay?’ I was about to answer, when, for the second time in my life, I fainted.

The first thing I saw when I regained consciousness was Mell and Mrs. Jenson. I gave them a meek smile but said nothing. I sat up and saw that Ailina had been removed from the wall.

‘I’m glad to see you are awake. You made us both very worried.’ Mrs. Jenson said, returning my smile.

‘Well, if we had eased her gently into this as I suggested, we would have did not need to be worried.’

‘Do not blame this on me. We had no choice but to tell her like that. If there was another option- I would have taken it.’

‘There was another option. There always is, remember who taught me that?’

‘Guys, please, you don’t need to fight. I am fine, and so are you two, so I do not see what the big deal is. I just was overwhelmed and got a little dizzy. It was nothing.’ I tried to say, but all that came out was ‘guys,’ but they understood.

‘She’s right, and she also deserves an explanation, don’t you?’

Mell said as she handed me a glass of water, which I hastily gulped down.

‘That is fair.’ Mrs. Jenson turned to me. ‘That is if you think you are up to hear it?’ I nodded, happy to finally get some answers.

‘Okay, what do you want to know?’

‘Everything, where are we? Who are you guys? What is the tattoo? What is Skoufyceol’s?’ The last question escaped my lips before I realized what I had said.

‘How do you know about Skoufyceol’s?’

‘Oh, um, well, when I first woke up, I wanted some answers. So, I kind of, um, went exploring, and, um, overheard you guys arguing about it.’ I gave them a very sheepish smile and felt embarrassed. But not as embarrassed as Mell and Mrs. Jenson.

‘You heard that?’ Mrs. Jenson asked. I nodded. ‘No wonder Ailina was so freaked out.’

‘Anyway, Skoufyceol- is short for Skoufyceol School for the Exceptionally Exceptional, so you can see why everyone has just shortened it to Skoufyceol.

It is a boarding school for all those who have special powers or are not human. It is cool there, a lot better than Adam's Prep. Though that does not mean much, because a school of monkeys would be better, no offense Mrs. J.'

'None took, I was only there for you two.'

'Okay, so you've answered one of my questions, how about these gesturing to the tattoos on our wrists-' what are they?'

'They're called Protectors' Mark. I know nothing fancy, but that's what they are.'

‘That is nice, but how about answering what I asked you?’

‘I did.’ I shot her the worst glare I could manage-which says nothing because I was having trouble not laughing. This was so like Mell, answer the question, but only what you asked, even if it is implied.

‘Well, what does it mean and how did I get it?’

‘It symbolizes that you are protected, and you gave it to yourself.’

‘No, I didn’t. I think I would have remembered giving myself a tattoo.’

‘You did. You just do not realize it. A Protectors’ Mark is given when a person Chooses another to be their Protector.’

‘I understood about half of that.’

‘When you gave me that friendship bracelet, do you remember what you said?’ I shook my head. ‘You said that you trusted me with your life and that you always would. You said that we would protect each other from then on. Without knowing it, you had sealed your fate.’

‘Yeah, well, if that happened in third grade, why did I just get the tattoo, sorry, Protectors’ Mark?’

‘Because, until now, you have not to need to have one. You technically have had it ever since then, but it didn’t show itself until now.’ I still did not understand, but I thought that it might be for the best right now.

‘Okay, so besides being protected what does it mean?’

‘That is it, it is a magical symbol that allows a Charge- you- and their Protector-me-an effortless way to see if they are in any danger.

When Mark glows brightly, the danger is near. Of course, that is not always the case, but you will learn more about that at Skoufyceol. You will be spending the rest of the year there.'

Again, I only understood about half of that.

'Wait… Am I transferring? Is my mom okay with that?'

'Yes, you are transferring and as for your mom, well, she, um, thinks you ran away.'

'WHAT! She is going to kill me! What in the world were you thinking when you told her that?'

I was yelling at Mrs. Jenson because she must have been the one to say something to her.

‘We had no other choices. We did what we had to do to keep you safe.’

‘But you could have told her something else, anything else. What about you, Mell, where does she think you are or did not even bother with that?’

‘She thinks, well, um, right now she, uh, thinks that, um, I’m still there. We made some arrangements.’

‘And you could not do the same for me, because?’

‘We were barely able to cover Sarceeala’s disappearance, let alone your own.’

‘You could have at least tried,’ I grumbled to myself.

‘Believe me, we did, but your mother is very persistent.’

‘Okay, now I have one more question. Why am I going to Skoufyceol?’

‘Because you are a Teliken.’

‘A what?’

‘Teliken… an immensely powerful magical creature. They-and you-are part faerie, part pixie, and part elf.’ Mrs. Jenson said, unfazed by any of this.

‘Like me.’ Mell said. I gave her a quizzical look.

‘I’m a Woodland Elf, I- Mellie know to all as Mell- stand-in at under 4-foot-tall- look like and young girl yet have pointed ears and have a doe rack on my head smooth white skin, of sexy, seductive, desirable, alluring, and inviting covary small horns- feminine doe eyes with large lashes; I have always on an armored fringed gown- in

shades of greens- to blend in-in the unforgiven woods, with ribbons hanging of many greenish colors, my defenses for all the dark things this world has to offer is a hardcovered wood bow and sharp sliver arrows with holy angel white feathers- and barefoot.'

'Yeah right. Just like I am a, what was it called again? Oh yes, Teliken, if you were an elf, wouldn't you have pointed ears?'

'I do.' She pushed her hair behind her pointed ears. I stared, mouth open, gaping like an idiot.

‘Oh.’ I turned to Mrs. Jenson. ‘What about you? Are you an elf too?’

‘No. I am what your kind would call a witch. But I like to call my kind by our real name, an Ariean. Human names are so barbaric.

Speaking of which, do not refer to me by that horrid human name any longer, I cannot stand it. Call me Ardelia.’

‘No way. Prove it.’ She waved her hands and sparks flew. The water pitcher rose off the table and came over to where I and my glass were. The water poured into my almost empty glass. Again, I could only stare.

‘Now, do you have any other questions?’ I nodded.

‘Those guys that were chasing us, what are they and why were they chasing us?’ I asked, afraid of the answer. Mell and Ardelia exchanged a nervous look.

‘The people you encountered are-were-members of a clan known as Creperum, which is Latin for darkness. They are also Dialons, a powerful creature that is skilled in both disguises and mind control. They were after you because that was their assignment, to capture you and bring you to the Creperum.’

‘Why?’

‘Your parents-your real parents-are at an immensely powerful place in the Teliken community. Capturing you would ultimately bring them to their downfall.’

‘What do you mean my real parents?’

‘You did not think that the people who raised you are Teliken, did you? No, while they did raise you, they have no connection to the Teliken race, besides you. Your father wanted you to have a normal life, without worrying about this world, so he managed to get a hold of the names of spouses who he

thought would be a good family for you.'

'But I've seen my birth certificate.'

'Your father managed to, shall we say, convince the couple that you were their daughter. They looked enough like you so that in the future you would not question the relationship between you and them. Your father forged a birth certificate and everything else you would need to live a humans' life.'

'I'm sorry, Tay, I know this is a lot for you to take in. But we must leave soon. If you are ready, I would like to

leave as soon as possible.’ Mell said, genuinely concerned, but she was worried about something else.

‘Okay, we can leave now if you want.’

‘Actually,’ Ardelia interjected. ‘I think that it would be best if we spend the night. Let Taylor get her stuff together and rest, she isn’t exactly in the best of conditions.’

‘But we have already spent five days here, any more time wasted is just foolish.’

‘Five days! I have been unconscious for five days?’

‘Off and on, but yes.’ I suddenly felt very dizzy.

‘You know what, I think we should spend the night after all,’ I said feeling like I was going to faint, again.

‘Okay, but tomorrow we are leaving. I’ll pack your stuff Taylor,’ Mellie said, gesturing towards the clothes that were in the chest I flew into the other day. They were mine.

‘I’ll let you get some sleep, Taylor, good night girls,’ Ardelia said, leaving the room. I gratefully closed my eyes and let sleep overtake me.

The sun was extremely bright after being underground for the past six days. Mell, Ardelia, and I just spent an hour leaving the tunnels. It was about ten-thirty now and I was blind.

‘So, how are we getting to Skoufyceol?’ By now I half expected some weird light to teleport us to the school.

Part: 11

‘Cars are not my thing- there like getting shot out of a cannon.’ Mell said gesturing towards a FLYING HORSE AND CARRIAGE that pulled up to the edge of the tunnels.

It was black with tinted windows. The trunk popped open and Mell took the bags I was carrying two duffel bags and a messenger bag. She threw them in the back, then opened the carriage door and gestured for me to get inside.

‘Aren’t you coming?’ I asked Ardelia, who was standing outside of the carriage with a sad look on her face.

‘No, I’m afraid not. I must return to Adam’s Preparatory. It would be too suspicious if all of us just disappeared. Besides, you have no use for me, I did what I needed to. I was

supposed to leave when you woke up, but I had some responsibility to explain things to you.'

'Oh, well, I hope I'll see you again.'

'As do I. Goodbye, Taylor.'

'Bye.' She turned and left, going back into the tunnels.

'Taylor,' I turned to Mell, 'we really should be going, they were expecting us to be there at one.'

'Okay.' I got into the carriage now.

I started the window until I could not see anything out of it. We

must have gone into a tunnel or something. We stayed in that tunnel for an hour. When we came out, I could not believe my eyes.

The buildings looked archaic, yet modern. There were five distinct buildings each with their unique look, yet they all looked the same. A high stone wall surrounded the entire school. It was about twenty feet high. As soon as the car pulled into the campus Mell relaxed.

Behind more cars from the 1920s pulled up... The cars and the carriages beside pulled up to the first building and we got out. A tall exotic

woman, with auburn hair, pulled into a bun and golden eyes stepped out of the shade of some trees and greeted us.

‘Ms. Hedsome it is a pleasure to see you again. Ms. Every night this is our first encounter. I am Kelania Endlocke, but you shall call me Headmistress Endlocke while you attend school here, unless otherwise instructed. I hope your journey had no further implications.’ We both shook our heads. ‘Good… Now, if you will follow me, I will show you to your dorm rooms. I am afraid that you two will not be sharing a room. I hope you

understand.’ I started to ask why when Mell stopped me.

‘Yes, of course, we understand. Thank you for taking us in so-o late in the year Headmistress Endlocke.’

‘Yes, of course. Now, follow me.’ She led us to the building on the far end. But on the way, we entered the courtyard. I stopped dead in my tracks, staring. I tried to tell myself that it was a coincidence, but I did not believe that. I could not because it was the same place as my dream.

‘Taylor, are you okay? Are you daydreaming or something?’ I could only shake my head.

‘I-it… I-is… same.’ Mell understood immediately.

‘Here? Are you sure it wasn’t somewhere else?’ I nodded; it was defiantly the same.

‘Is everything all right?’ Headmistress Endlocke said, but I do not think she cared. I snapped out of the trance-like state I was in.

‘Yeah, everything’s fine. I just had a feeling of déjà vu.’

‘Alright, then shall we move on.’ We followed her again. When we stopped again, we were on the third floor of the building. ‘This is your room

Sarceeala. Your roommate will be in shortly, classes are over. Speaking of which, here is your class schedule, and here is yours, Taylor.' She handed us sheets of paper and continued leading me away from Mell.

We walked up to another floor in complete silence. Finally, we stopped at the door. 'This is your room. Your roommate will also be in shortly to help you get settled. If you need anything else my office is in the main building or you can go to the office in this building. Goodbye.'

I opened the door, not sure what to expect. The room was

surprisingly normal. It was large with a bathroom adjoining it. There were two beds, two end-tables, two closets, two desks, a TV, a table and some chairs, a mini-fridge, and a microwave. One bed had nothing on it, but the other was occupied. It was unmade with a pillow on the floor. Clothes were carelessly thrown on top of it. I wondered who my new roommate was as I threw my bags on the other bed.

I finished making my bed. Mell gave me everything I would need for a dorm room, including a laptop- and was surfing the web when the door opened.

A girl with straight shoulder-length hair and smoky hazel eyes walked in. She was wearing jeans and a t-shirt with some insignia on it. She sighed and threw her backpack onto her bed. She put the books she was carrying on a desk. She turned around and jumped back, startled to see me.

‘Oh, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to scare you. I was told this was my dorm room. I’m Taylor Every night.’ Her expression changed completely, and she sat down on her bed.

‘Oh yes, I was told I was getting a roommate. I am Reina Wenshire. So, what are you? Faerie?

Elf? Pixie? I am a Pixie myself. Which is cool for sneaking around campus.'

'I'm a Teliken, I think.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, until six days ago I thought I was human, and I just found out that I was a Teliken yesterday. But I could have heard wrong.'

'I doubt it; you look like a Teliken. Who is your Protector?' She asked, gesturing towards the Protectors' Mark on my wrist.

'Her name is Sarceeala Hedsome. Her dorm room is on the third floor. She's a Woodland Elf.'

‘Cool. Mine is Seraina Telenson. She’s a witch.’

‘I thought witches were called Arieans.’

‘I guess… nobody does. Well, except for the Elders. How would you know what the witches’ other name was?’

‘Ardelia told me.’ I was not sure what to say.

‘Who?’ She could not hide the look of both shock and amazement on her face.

‘Ardelia… well, I don’t know her last name. She explained some things to me yesterday.’

‘No, I know who she is. But do you…’

‘Not really.’ Realizing for the first time just how true that was.

‘She is an extremely powerful Ariean. She is one of the most powerful Elder. You should feel extremely honored she even looked your way, and was alone to talk with you.’

‘Really?’ She nodded.

‘Yeah. But I am overstating things. That’s what happens when your

Protector is an Ariean.' Reina stood up and went over to where my bags were. 'We should probably start unpacking your stuff.'

'Yeah… I'd kind of like to know what I brought with me.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, you know how I said that found out I wasn't human six days ago;' she nodded. 'Well, that was kind of forced on me two days ago after I got knocked out by some Dialons. What I mean is that six days ago some Dialons attacked Mell and me. I lost consciousness and when I woke up again, I had a slight problem.'

‘Define little.’

‘Well, apparently someone named Ailina knew something about something-don’t ask me what I have no idea and tried to kill me. But she did not, because I well, froze her to a wall. Then fainted.’ This sounded a lot weirder coming from my mouth than when it happened.

‘*Y*ou froze her to a wall?’

‘She had a knife to my throat! What was I supposed to do? Anyway, after I woke up again Mell and Ardelia-who I thought at the time was my Algebra teacher-explained everything.

Which reminds me, I forgot to ask who Ailina is.'

'A shape-shifter.' Reina said solemnly.

'You know about her?'

'Yeah everyone does. Well, everyone. She is powerful too. I have heard that she can transform into anyone on the planet, and you will have no idea who is the real and who is Ailina. She used to work as a spy for some clan, the Winsentra, I believe. But then she betrayed them to the Creperum and was locked away in some jail. Hey, did you just change the subject to avoid finishing?'

‘No. That’s it. After they explained that stuff to me, I felt a little dizzy, so I went back to sleep and Mell packed for me. That’s why I don’t know what was packed for me.’

Part: 12

‘Oh. Well, I guess we’re about to find out.’ She went over to my bags and started to unpack.

We were unpacking the second duffel bag. The first had contained everything I would need for school and any book I would want to read. My bathroom stuff and well, anything else I could need. The second bag was full of clothes and shoes. I had stilettos,

converse sneakers, flip-flops, and any other type of shoes imaginable. T-shirts, tank tops, long sleeves, halters, everything. Designer jeans, skirts, and dresses. I had dozens of dresses, in every color and design possible. Including the white halter dress from my dream.

I wanted to throw it out of the window, burn it, and, well, anything else that would get rid of that dress. But I knew that if I did that, I would have to explain it to Reina. And I did not want her thinking I was any weirder than she already thought I was. I mean, how would I explain that to

her? So, I just hung it in the back of my closet and said nothing.

The next day Reina and I were in a little kitchenette that was on the first floor waiting for Mell and Seraina. We had just finished breakfast and were standing away from the girls that were rushing around, trying to get ready.

‘Hey, sorry I’m late. I overslept. Again… You must be Taylor. I’m Serina, it’s nice to meet you.’ A girl with short black hair came running up to us. ‘Oh, and Sarcelles told me to tell you she’s on her way.’

‘What happened Seraina, destroyed your alarm clock again?’ It was obvious that Reina was joking.

‘You know how much- I hate mornings. Besides, it was so loud. Which reminds me, I owe Sarceeala a new one now too.’ She looked a little sheepish as she said that.

‘Nice. You need to work on your self-control.’

‘I know.’ Just then Mell came rushing into the room.

‘Hey sorry, my alarm clock didn’t go off-’ she shot an accusatory

look at Seraina ‘-and I ended up oversleeping.’

‘I said I was sorry! I didn’t mean to do it; I was just so tired.’

‘Whatever… so, what classes do you have with me, Tay?’ She pulled her class schedule out of her bag. I did the same. And actually- that was the first time I had taken a good look at mine.

‘Hmm, we have Languages of the Worlds, Drama and of course, our Protector-Charge class.’

‘What?’

‘I’ll explain later, but right now we need to go.’ The room had completely cleared out.

‘Come on. Your first class is right next to mine.’ Reina said taking my wrist and dragging me away.

My first class was History of the Teliken, which was about the Teliken race, duh. Okay, I had no idea what it was when I first got there, but the rest of the class was nice and filled me in on what was happening. I just have about, oh, three years’ worth of catching up to do in homework-actually I just had to read the chapters in the textbook that I missed, but still, it was

a lot. My next class was supposed to help me with my powers, but since I did not know anything about what I could do besides the whole water manipulation thing-I ended up sitting around half the class.

Next was a self-defense class, which was cool because I got to learn how to fight, use a bow and arrows and even use some knives-okay I got to learn how to fight and watch people use bows and arrows and knives, but I will use them. Then it was time for lunch. I meet up with Reina, Mell, and Seraina again and ate.

Afterward, Mell and I went to Languages of the Worlds, which was completely and utterly confusing. If I thought Spanish was hard, well this makes that seem like a walk in the park. First, the teacher was talking in some language from some country on a planet that is defiantly not Earth. Then he was speaking in some other language from who knows where. Finally, he switched back to English, after speaking in Chinese, Japanese, and God-knows-what-else. Luckily, I was not the only one lost, about three-quarters of the class did not understand it either. I could not wait to

get out of there, that is until I saw what our next class was like.

The Protector-Charge class is all about learning how to use them and I quote ‘special bond between the two of you.’ It was so not fun. At all. The drama was awesome, we are reading Romeo and Juliet, which is my favorite play.

…Ever.

And finally, I was at my last class of the day: Flying 101. I was especially worried about this class for one reason alone I had no wings! At least, I thought I did not. My teacher was awesome and taught me how to

unfurl my wings-I was glad the shirt I was wearing had slits cut into it, Mell had thought of everything. After my fifth try, I managed to get my wings out. It was like they just appeared. They were pretty, with shades of pink, blue, purple, gold, and white all mixing. Plus, they were the same as every single one of my daydreams.

I was so excited; I would get to fly like I could in my daydreams. I imagined myself soaring high above the clouds again. Unfortunately, it was not as easy as it was in my daydreams. First, I could not figure out how to even start flying. I thought it would come as

naturally as in my daydreams, I was wrong. Flapping took some serious Eminence and concentration, two things I do not usually have a lot of. Second, when I finally figured out how to flap, I could not figure out how to stay airborne.

Flapping was difficult, but trying to get enough power behind each flap to both to get and keep me in the air was impossible. I could already hear the possibilities to be mocked. But, the thought of mockery was just what I needed. I managed to rise into the air, and stay there. I tested my ability to stay in the air by changing

directions and speed and when I was sure I was not going to suddenly drop out of the sky, I started to fly.

Part: 13

I was nothing like in my daydreams. It was better. Except I could use some grace. I left the school grounds, flying through clouds like nobody’s business. I looked down and saw the highway we took to get to school. I could see cars passing a woman jogging on the side of the road. I could see every detail as if I were right next to them. I have always had good eyesight, but I never dreamed it was that good.

I was so focused on the woman, mesmerized, that I did not even think about flapping, which was a problem. You know in cartoons when someone will run off the side of a building and hang in the air until they look down? Well, that is a bunch of crap. Because for me, one second I was hovering, the next I was plummeting towards the earth and breakneck speed.

I tried to scream, but the wind had taken my breath away. I tried to think of something I could do to at least slow down my fall. Nothing was coming to my mind. But the ground was coming closer to me. I was going to be roadkill

in a few seconds. I tried to clear my mind and focus on flapping my wings, which seemed impossible. Luckily, for me, it was not. I managed to start flapping just in time. I returned to the sky, unharmed, and scaring a few drivers.

After flying for a few more minutes, I saw someone flying towards me. I felt a tingling sensation on my left arm. I looked down and saw my Protectors' Mark glowing as brightly as when Ailina attacked me. I immediately turned around and flew away as fast as I could. I did not turn to see if they

were still following me, I just kept flying.

Finally, I risked a glance back and saw nothing behind me. My Protectors' Mark was not glowing anymore, so I figured I was safe. I turned around to head back to the school, only to find myself completely lost. I was not completely lost. I knew this place, not the location, but the way the wind that was too low for me to feel blew through the trees of this countryside. I knew the way that the rows of wheat looked through the clouds I was above. I knew the lake, with water so clear and inviting. I knew

everything about the place that was right underneath me, even though I had never been there in my life, except for my daydreams.

I laughed, despite myself. I was lost and had no idea where I was supposed to go now, but I never thought that I would imagine a place that existed or that I would find it. I flew down to the lake just because I could. I cupped my hands and gathered some water, just for the fun of it. I dropped the water and flew over to the wheat fields. I brushed my hands against the tops of the stalks of wheat, laughing at the novelty of it. Eventually,

though, the novelty did wear off, and I realized how late it was getting. And that I was still lost.

I started flying back the way I came, or that I thought I came, looking for something I could recognize. I wandered in the sky for what felt like forever. I began to wonder what time it was and if anyone was looking for me. I was beginning to think I was hopeless and that I would never find my way back to the school when I saw the jogger again. It was not a solid landmark or anything, but it was enough to make me hopeful. I flew back the way the jogger was coming from.

After a few minutes, I could start to make out the school. I flew towards it faster than before, which I thought was impossible. I was coming up to school when I saw someone else flying. It was Mell. I tried to slow down, but it did not go well. I ended up missing her by a few inches and backpedaling in the air. It was amusing to someone watching, but to me, it was downright embarrassing. I saw Mell laughing and I just glared at her as she flew closer.

‘Shut up.’ I said, still glaring.

‘I didn’t say anything.’ She said holding up her hands.

‘Whatever. Then don’t say anything.’ She nodded. I could tell she wanted to ask where I was, but for some reason, it was not.

We entered the school and flew to where Mrs. Lenning, the teacher, and a faerie, was standing. ‘Where have you been, Ms. Evernight?’

So that’s why Mell did not ask, she knew how much I hated repeating myself, so she spared me from saying- it twice in a few minutes. ‘I got lost.’

‘Obviously- would you care to tell me why you left school grounds?’ I shrugged.

‘I didn’t think it was that big of a deal. I’m sorry, it won’t happen again.’

‘Let us hope not. You show a lot of potentials, I do not want you to ruin it, or prove me wrong. Now I believe some of your friends are wondering what happened to you, run along.’ I nodded and left with Mell.

‘What didn’t you tell her?’ She asked when we were out of Mrs. Lenning’s hearing.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked innocently.

‘Don’t give me that. You know you suck at lying. And I know that you were not giving the whole story. You never act like that unless your hiding something.’

‘I don’t suck at lying!’ I said defensively. She raised an eyebrow.

Sighing, I told her what happened.

‘You… what?! How did I not know about this!?’ She was asking herself more than me. I just shrugged.

‘It doesn’t matter really, I’m fine.’

‘I don’t like this, at all.’ ‘Join the club, but we can’t do anything about it.’

‘That’s what worries me.’ She said going into her room. ‘Night, Tay.’

‘Night!’ I said going to my room, wondering why Mell did not know I was in trouble earlier, and what that meant.

The farthest side of the campus was completely engulfed in woods, that is where I was going. The night before Mell, Reina, and Seraina explained what was happening. Every so often, the teachers would set up a Battle, to test the abilities of the students, both in

self-defense and power use. We would be put into teams and try to capture the other entire team or their base. I was still really confused about the whole thing when I went to the woods the next day. I stepped into the woods, thankful to have worn sensible clothes. I started walking away from my team's headquarters, hiding the sound of my footsteps. I was not going to be the one to blow it for the team on a stupid mistake.

The entire team meets before for a debriefing. Although, I was still lost on what is going on. I was an offense member, the one trying to

capture everyone and the base. So-o, I started to go toward enemy territory. I came to a river and realized just how lost I was. I was contemplating where to go when I heard a twig snap behind me. My body went rigid and I was about to climb a tree when a guy from my team stepped out of the forest.

'Hey, you lost?' I nodded. He laughed, 'Yeah, I thought so. Do not worry I had trouble with my first Battle too. Are you on offense or defense?'

Part: 14

'Um, offense.'

‘Cool, I’m on Defense. All you need to do is continue upstream. Just follow the river. Anything else?’

‘Yeah, do you have any tips for me?’

‘Sure, here’s one: Don’t get caught. Seriously, just because this is your first Battle does not mean anyone will go easy on you, and it is a pain in the butt to have to rescue a person. Here is another: Trust your instincts. If your gut is telling you to run, get away from that place as fast as you can. Finally: Capture as many people as you can. It’s always fun to have a newbie

capture a ton of people on another team.'

'Thanks.' I turned to leave.

'Oh, and Taylor, use your powers. This isn't just for self-defense.' He turned and went downstream, leaving me trying to figure out what he meant. How did he know my name, and that I have power?

...And what he meant by powers.

I started walking upstream when I had a sudden urge to retreat into the water. Remembering what my teammate said, I let the water engulf

me, using my power to do so. And not a moment too soon, either, a bunch of the other team's members burst through the woods. I smiled, somehow knowing they could not see me. My only thought at the time was: This is going to be fun. I let the water rise, taking me with it. I will never forget the shock on their faces when I came out of the water. I managed to capture three of the players.

Now, you are confused, so it is best if I take a moment to explain just what was going on. First off, we were split into two teams, a blue and a yellow. I was on the blue team. Second,

there are two objectives to this Battle, the first: Take the other team's base. The second: Capture as many people on the other team as possible, preferably all of them. When the Battle first started, we were given…well, I did not know what it was, but it looked like a silver ball. The ball contained something that allowed you to capture a player in a bubble.

Anyway, the three- I captured stared at me, shocked. The rest of the players ran back into the woods. I would have followed them if I had not seen them looking back to make sure I was. I intuitively knew it was a trap. I

let the water overtake me again and started flowing down the river. Then I remembered where I needed to go and went upstream.

Eventually, I heard voices and I stopped moving. I watched what was going on. The yellow team had ten of my teammates, including the guy who helped me earlier. I was wondering how to help them and not get caught when the players from before came into the clearing.

‘How did it go?’ the girl who spoke was the team leader.

‘We lost three… The Every-night girl is faster than we thought. And she is using the water.’

‘Is she…? Well, let us see if she still is.’ The girl got up and walked over to the river. I felt confident enough that she could not see me, but I was not going to take any chances. I got ready to get out of the water and capture her when she knelt to the river. She muttered something and put both hands on the water. It suddenly got extremely hot and I knew she was using her power. It is now or never, I thought. I sprang out of the water and captured her. Those closest by ran

forward trying to attack me, but I had anticipated them. I captured six others and was attacking the rest with water when they started retreating.

‘How do I rescue you?’ I asked the guy who helped me.

‘Use your Conto.’

‘My what?’

‘It’s what you have been using to capture the people with. There is a setting on it that will let you release us.’ I took out my Conto and looked for the setting he was talking about. I found it and used it on all of them. They were all released, some seemed a little

bitter about being rescued by the newbie.

‘Okay, I’m sure they're coming back. What do we do now?’

‘You do nothing. We are going to go and finish capturing them.’ A tall blond-haired person said, obviously bitter.

‘I don’t think so. Who just freed you and captured the other team’s leader? Was it you? I do not think so. I’m going with you.’

‘Whatever; let us just go.’ She started toward the woods.

‘Wait; I have a better idea.’

‘And I’m sure we’d all love to hear it.’ She was not light on sarcasm.

‘I could make you a part of the water. Or better yet, the air.’ I had no idea where that came from.

‘Well then, get to it.’ I let my instincts take over. The next thing I-or anyone else-knew, we were in the air. We were the air. We could still see each other, but no one else could. We floated through the air until we found where the yellow team went. We took out our Contos and hovered above them. I got us out of the air and we started falling towards them. They did not suspect a thing until it was too late. We captured

every member of that team, in record-breaking time.

When I first woke up, I first thought that I was back at my house and that everything was just a dream. Then I saw Reina. I could not help but feel a little crushed. It is not that I do not like her, I just wanted to go back to my old life. For things to go back to normal. But that will never happen.

I got up and went to the kitchen. I was scrambling some eggs when Reina walked in. I needed some comfort food and I love scrambled eggs, okay. Without saying anything I added a few more eggs to the pan while

she got another plate out. This was sort of our morning routine. If someone had already started making breakfast before the other was up, just make some of them when they got up.

‘Hey… what are you doing up this early?’ Reina said looking at the clock. It was a little after six in the morning.

‘I woke up and couldn’t get back to sleep. Is there something wrong with that?’ I asked defensive, I do not handle mornings well.

‘No, It’s just a little unusual. Especially for a Saturday.’ My head shot up and I stared at her.

‘Isn’t today Monday?’ I could have sworn it was.

‘Yeah right, is that why you are up so early?’ She laughed.

‘No, Sorta; are you sure it’s Saturday?’ She nodded. ‘But I could have sworn it was Monday.’

She shook her head. ‘It is Saturday. Why did you even think that today’s Monday?’

‘Because of the… never mind. I just had a vivid dream last night.’ I said hoping she would not ask any more questions. She did not, I could tell she

wanted to, but she just kept whatever she was thinking to herself.

I finished making the eggs and loaded our plates full of them. We went up to our room and ate in silence. When we finished Reina cleaned up. I went over to my side of the room and started surfing the web. We were not doing anything when Seraina and Mell came into our room.

‘Hey, guys what’s up?’ I asked, uninterested.

‘Well, actually something.’ Mell said. I looked up, wondering what they were talking about.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Well, now and then the school hosts a Battle. Where you have…’

‘Where you have to either capture the other team or their base?’ I said, remembering my dream, which I thought was not a dream. Everybody looked shocked, but I was used to it by now. Mell nodded, then looked at Reina.

‘Don’t look at me. I did not say a thing. Although, now it makes sense why you thought today was Monday.’

‘You mean it’s real?!’ I could not believe what was happening. I

thought the strange things would stop when I came here, but I was wrong.

'Yes; where did you hear about it?'

'My dream.' I began to tell them about my dream. When I finished the looks, I got were a range of shocked, awed, and worried.

'Taylor,' I recognized Mell's tone. It was the 'I'm going to tell you something crazy but important' tone. 'Your dream was a glimpse into the future. I think that most of your daydreams are too.'

‘You aren’t including them,’ I was hoping she was not including the nightmare I had.

‘Yes; I am.’ I did not know what to do. So, I did the thing I was getting good at. I fainted. Again.

This time when I woke up, I was in my bed. I could hear Mell and

Reina arguing about taking me to the infirmary. Seraina was sitting on Reina’s bed. She was obviously in charge of making sure I was okay, but she seemed more interested in the conversation than me.

‘As I said, I could just send her to the nurse to make sure she’s okay,’ Seraina said, not even looking at me. She was not particularly good at her job.

‘No! I’d rather not have my Charge end up like my alarm clock,’ Mell said, obviously alarmed.

Finally, I fake coughed, to get their attention. ‘I’m glad you guys are so concerned about me, but unfortunately for you, I’m fine.’

‘Yes; very unfortunate.’ Mell said sarcastically. She glared at Seraina, who smiled sheepishly,

obviously embarrassed. ‘Are you sure you’re, all right?’

‘Yeah, just a little tired of fainting all of the time.’ I said, dryly.

‘Well, we better talk to the nurse. Make sure you are okay and see if you should take part in today’s Battle.’ I nodded and let Mell lead me to the nurses.

When we get to the nurse’s building, I see something that makes me scream, and faint again. It was someone. I had never actually met him before, but I still knew him. I knew him from a daydream I had a year ago.

I grabbed my bag and ran out the door. And right into a boy about to knock. He was about my age, but several inches taller. He had wavy auburn hair and pale green eyes.

‘Taylor Ever night?’ He said.

‘Yes, why do you want to know?’ I asked, wondering how he knew my name. In response, he held up an envelope.

‘This is for you.’ He said, handing it to me. I looked at it for a minute and when I looked back up, he was gone. Inside the envelope was an invitation to a ball.

I stared at the boy. Wondering if what had happened in my dream would happen again. I wanted to chase him down and ask him why I met him in my daydream, but I could not do that. Not with Mell here. I went with her to the nurse to see if I should take part in the Battle instead.

Fainting does not qualify as a suitable reason to miss the Battle- much to Mell's amazement. Because I ended up right back where I was in my dream. But the results were different. Quite different. I could not fade into the air or the water. Heck, I could barely control the water. Scratch that. I could

not control it at all. And I got captured, about four separate times. And we lost. Big time- It ended up being a miserable failure on all counts.

I trudged back into my dorm room, after getting my butt kicked in every way, shape, and form. I walked in and landed face down on my comforter. All I needed now was some ice. And a chance to redo today, with the results I got in my dream. I got neither.

Instead, I got a knock on my door. I did not bother getting up. I figured that if it were important, they would just walk in, or say something. They did not. Instead, they slid

something under the door. I turned on my side to look at it. And promptly went back to my stomach. I had never been this sore in my life. It hurt to move. It hurt not to move. But mostly, it hurt to breathe.

Eventually, the pain was bearable enough for me to get up. I walked over to the door and picked up what was slid underneath. It was an envelope, with my name on it. I tore it open, read, and nearly had a heart attack.

Taylor Ever night, we would like to cordially invite you to the Thousand Bell Ball as our guest of

honor. As our newest student, it would be an honor to be able to celebrate your talents. This will take place on the thirteenth of the month starting at 6 P.M sharp. Dinner is included. This is a black-tie affair, so please dress appropriately. Please respond as soon as you can. We hope to see you there.

As soon as I finish reading, I dropped the invitation. It is the same one as the one from my old daydream.

Okay, first let me apologize, for taking so long to finish this chapter. I had writer's block, then I just did not bother to write it anymore. Second, let me say that I know this chapter is long;

you could say I was trying to compensate for taking so long, but really, a lot just HAD to happen in this chapter. So, without any further ado, let me present to you!

Chapter 11

I wanted nothing more than to figure out why all of this was happening to me. It was not normal. Nothing in my life was normal anymore. Heck, I was not even human anymore. Although, technically, I was never human. But at least before I had thought I was human- I thought I was normal. Now Icould notcould not even pretend I was human; not when every time I looked in

the mirror, I saw a giant pair of freaking wings.

I know that I was all excited and everything when I first found out, but now the novelty and excitement were starting to wear off, and I was starting to see them for what they were: a big, fat pain in the butt. Plus, I finally realized how life-changing all this crap was. I could never go back to the place that I called home. I would never get to see the people I called my parents for the first fifteen years of my life- not that that was terrible, but still, it hurts a little. Add the fact that, not only am I adopted, but I am also a freak

with wings, and it tends to be at least a little traumatic.

At least, it certainly seems like it would be. It felt like it was.

Hopefully, that would be considered enough of an excuse for me to crumple into a heap on my bed, bawling after that stupid invitation fluttered to the ground. Sure, I have cried before. I cried when my grandma- at least I thought she was my grandma at the time- died when I was nine. I cried that time when I was five and my hand was crushed by a door, breaking two fingers, and severely bruising the rest of my hand. I have cried several

times in my life, but I have always had a good reason to. Although, I guess everything that had been happening to me- being yanked away from my family and being thrown into, well, another world- did qualify as a good reason, and if it did not, then this world was even more screwed up than my old one.

It was at about that moment that Reina decided it would be an enjoyable time to walk in. I can only imagine what I must have looked like; curled into a little ball at the end of my bed, bawling my eyes out with what looked like a small note on the floor in front of me. She must have taken one

look at the scene in front of her, dropped whatever it was that she had been holding, and immediately ran over to me, crouching in front of me. She started rubbing my back and muttering something that I could not understand. Although, I had the suspicion that she was not exactly speaking English. Not that it mattered, I would not be able to understand her if she were; I was crying too hard to hear anything besides my sobs.

'What's wrong?' She asked when I had finally calmed down enough that I would be able to form a coherent sentence. I would have been able to,

too, if it were not for the stupid hiccups that I would get after every single stinking time I would cry.

'What's- hiccup- wrong? What is right- hiccup? My life has been- hiccup- become a bad sci-fi movie that would- hiccup- be on Lifetime!' I yelled, followed by an attack of hiccups and coughing. To my surprise, Reina started laughing.

'What?' I asked, wondering if I should be offended or not.

'You,' she said. That would be a yes; I should be offended.

‘What- hiccup’s that supposed to mean?’ I asked with as much dignity as I could manage- which was not a- lot.

‘What you said; It is so true… although, I don’t think that they’d put a sci-fi movie on the Lifetime network.’

I let out a shallow laugh. ‘No, just movies about girls getting pregnant at ten, finding out your dating-slash-married to a serial killer, and then finding out you were stolen at birth and belong in some faraway land; all in the same movie,’ I said. We looked at each other for a moment and then burst into hysterical fits of laughter, followed by Reina snorting,

which resulted in us laughing even harder. When we finally calmed down a little, the tears that were streaming down my face were from lack of breath. I do not know why either of, us found that so funny, but it felt good to laugh like that again. I could not remember the last time I had laughed that hard- it must have been at least several months, even more.

After I managed to catch my breath, I just sat there, not sure what I was supposed to do now. Unconsciously, I picked up my invitation and read it over again. Reina just stared at it with her mouth hanging

open. She seemed to be in complete shock.

‘Taylor?’ she finally managed to say.

‘What?’ With the ways, she was staring, I was starting to wonder just what it was that I was holding.

‘What is that?’ Her voice was shallow, almost timid. Instead of explaining, I simply shrugged and handed her the paper. She read it over quickly, her mouth dropping open increasingly with each passing sentence until it got to the point that I thought that her mouth was going to come unhinged and hit the floor.

‘Where did you get this?’ When she said it, it came out as a squeak.

‘Someone- slid it under the door; why?’

‘Why? Do you even know what this is?’

‘Um… an invitation?’ I said, ignoring her glare for my smart-aleck comment. ‘No, I don’t know what it is.’

‘This is an invitation to the Thousand Bell Ball!’

‘Yeah, I got that much from the invitation,’ I said, dryly.

‘Do you realize what that is?’

‘A dance?’

‘It’s only the most important ball that is held here! The king and queen even come, and you are the guest of honor!’

‘King and queen?’

‘Yeah, of most of the Telikens, and most others that don’t belong to certain clans,’ she said. I just stared at her blankly.

‘So, why am I invited then? I’m not exactly the most ‘talented’ person here, as the invite said.’

‘How am I supposed to know? I was hoping you could tell me.’

‘Probably not; think I’m not going.’

‘Ha! Good one,’ she said, laughing.

‘I’m not joking.’

‘Oh, you are going. There is no way you are going to pass up that chance.’

‘There’s one slight problem, Reina: I. Do not. Dance. As in, I do not knowledge. Not the kind of stuff that would be at a ‘ball’.’

‘I’ll help you.’

‘No, I have a better idea: I won’t go.’

‘You will. I’ll make sure of it.’

‘I refuse to make a fool of myself.’

‘I’ll make sure you don’t.’

‘And just how do you plan on doing that?’ I asked. Reina just smiled.

‘You’ll see.’

I thought that that was the end of the conversation. I went on with life as usual and never mentioned the ball again. Neither did Reina. A week had passed and by then I figured that she forgot, or at least, I hoped she had.

Unfortunately, that was not the case.

‘Wake up!’ Reina yelled, hitting me with a pillow.

‘No, I’m sleeping.’

‘Not anymore,’ she said, pulling my comforter off me and hitting me again. I sat up and glared at her.

‘Is this necessary?’

‘Yes… Do you know what today is?’

‘Saturday; the day I sleep in. Which is what I’m going to continue doing now if you don’t mind?’

‘I do mind, and it isn’t just a Saturday, it’s the thirteenth.’

‘So?’

‘So, you can’t sleep the day away. It’s already one, you have to get ready.’

‘No, I have to sleep. Good night. Oh, and if you hit me with that pillow one more time, I’m going to kill you.’

‘I don’t care; you have to wake up.’

‘No, I don’t. Let me sleep.’

‘Not a chance,’ she said, and then proceeded to beat me with the pillow.

‘Fine; I give up!’ I yelled, throwing the covers that Reina had not already stolen from me off. Reina just smiled, not even bothering to get rid of the pillow.

‘Excellent, now get ready,’ she said, whacking me with that cursed pillow one more time.

‘I’m going! Was that necessary?’

‘No, but it is fun.’

I glared at her as I went into the bathroom. By the time I finished showering and getting ready for the day, it was four. I walked back into our

room; my hair was still damp and hanging in rat tails.

‘What do you want me to do?’ I asked through gritted teeth. I was still mad about this, but I was not going to push Reina. I was certain that that pillow was not filled with nice soft feathers. A bunch of rocks or a pound of bricks, but whatever was in, it hurt.

‘Sit here,’ she said, pointing to a chair that was moved to the middle of the room. ‘Oh, and don’t complain.’

‘What are you going to do?’ I asked, warily.

‘Your hair, makeup, and anything else that I feel like,’ she said, cheerfully.

Instead of going to the chair, I walked right back into the bathroom and grabbed a bottle that was on my side of the sink. ‘Well, if you’re going to be doing my hair, then I think that you’re going to need this,’ I said, handing her my most beloved bottle of detangling spray.

‘I don’t think I’ll need that; your hair is still wet,’ she said with a laugh. I shrugged my shoulders and sat in the chair, taking the bottle with me anyway. Reina got the brush through

my hair twice before the first brush broke in half and the second one was lost in my thick, blonde mess- do not get me wrong, I love my hair, but it is a major pain in the butt- and she started cursing in several languages. I committed some of what she was saying to memory and offered her the bottle with a smirk.

'Do I need to say it?' I asked.

'If you do, you're going to end up like the first brush,' she growled, taking the bottle. I kept my mouth shut. After using about half of the bottle- which, to her credit, it usually takes about three-fourths of it when I use it-

my hair was brushed and pulled into an elaborate up-do that I would never be able to get out of my head. I had to have had at least a thousand bobby pins in my hair, and only a small section on either side of my face was not pulled back. My makeup was done in a way that managed to make my dark blue eyes look even bluer and made me look completely stunning.

'Okay, now it's time for your dress,' she said, bouncing up and down. 'I have to say, I'm in love with whoever packed for you, I want to borrow that magenta gown you have some time.'

I nodded, my eyes widening as she pulled out the dress, she wanted me to wear and then widening even more when I saw the shoes. The dress was stunning; it was several shades of blue, going from a dark midnight blue at the bodice to a pale, almost translucent blue at the bottom where it brushes the floor.

The sleeves were sheer, and wrapped around the top of the dress, connecting them to the bodice making it appear to be a frosted dark blue. There was no way I was going to be able to pull it off. Especially not if she expected me to wear the five-inch silver

stilettoes she was holding in her other hand.

‘Are you trying to kill me?’ I cried. ‘There is no way I can walk in those shoes!’

‘Payback for the brush,’ she said with a smirk.

‘I am going to die,’ I muttered.

‘Just shut up and get dressed.’

I obeyed, slipping into the dress and shoes. The dress seemed to be made for me specifically, forming a to my body perfectly, creating a shape I normally would never be able to have. The shoes were not that bad either,

walking in them was about impossible, but they were cute, at least. I walked- okay, I stumbled- back into the room to see Reina in a knee-length, gray dress, and a pair of black flats.

'Why is it you get a pair of flats and I'm stuck in these death traps?' I asked, tripping over myself once again.

'Because no one is going to see me,' she said with a wink before disappearing completely from view.

'What the heck?' I cried, before realizing that she was right in front of my face; although, she was about the size of a toothpick now. I stared at her,

transfixed by her sudden transformation.

‘What? You didn’t think I got into Skoufyceol only because of my wit and good looks, did you?’ she said, landing on my shoulder. I looked over and I could just barely see her translucent wings for the first time. ‘My dad’s a pixie, therefore, I’m a half-pixie, and I’m going to make sure you don’t make a complete fool of yourself tonight.’

‘Gee, thanks,’ I said dryly.

‘No problem, now we should go before we’re late. I don’t know what it was like at your old school, but here,

there is no such thing as ‘fashionably late’.’

I managed to find the ballroom- this school even had a ballroom?!- just in time. Reina was right: there was no ‘fashionably late’ here.

Everyone was on time and dressed just as-if not more- regally than I was. A guard stood at each door and for the first time, I started to wonder about how Reina was going to be able to get in. She was somehow undetected when I entered the ballroom and she kept whispering commands to me- most of which was to find my seat.

But, as soon as I set foot in the room, I was frozen in awe. The decorations were incredible, and I immediately understood the ball's name. Bells and chimes were hung everywhere, and candles were lit to make it look even more wonderful. Large tables were set up around what I assumed would be the dance floor. The table at the back- or it was the head- of the room had only three chairs and Reina said that it was for the royal family.

'Yoo-hoo! Earth to Taylor?' Reina yelled into my ear, snapping me out of my trance. 'I know it's pretty and

all, but the royal family is going to be arriving any minute now and you need to find your seat.'

I did as I was told and found my seat not a moment too soon. As soon as I sit down the double doors leading to the ballroom- which had been closed after everyone else entered- opened and three people walked in. It was easy to tell who they were just from the way they carried themselves, although the guy announcing that the king, queen, and princess had just entered did quell any doubts. Everyone stood and bowed so I mirrored them, but I was a little later

than everyone else, so I looked ridiculous. Nobody seemed to notice, and the royal family began to walk towards their seats. As they passed by me, I could not shake the feeling that they looked familiar, but I could not place it.

The Royals took their seats, and so did the rest of us. Food was served shortly afterward and then the dancing began. I avoided it at all costs; staying back by my table and saying, that my feet were sore- which, mind you, they were killing me- whenever anyone asked me to dance, which luckily only happened once. Mostly, I

watched the royals dance. I could not shake the feeling that they looked familiar, but I still could not place how it would be that I knew them.

'Hello, Taylor,' I heard from behind me while I was watching some of the dancers. I spun around and came face to face with the queen. I gasped as I finally realized why they were so familiar. I could help but stare into her blue eyes- the same blue as mine. I could not believe I had not realized it before; I was the like the queen. I am sure that my mouth dropped open and everything when I realized this. The king walked up behind his wife- the

princess following closely by, inspecting her manicure- and smiled down at me.

'Bow,' Reina whispered hoarsely. I bowed stiffly, but could not take my eyes off the queen.

'Taylor, dear, I think it's time we explained some things to you,' she said.

'You can come too, Reina,' the king said. Reina gasped. I nodded and followed them out of the room in a trance-like state.

Today was the day, the day that caused my ending. Today was also the

day that Lexy and Naddalin broke up and somehow, I finally found the courage to go over and talk to him. It was the end of the sixth period and I was in the hallway when I walked over to Naddalin, who was by his locker.

'Hi.' I said softly.

'Uh, hi?' he replied, shutting his locker, and turning around to face me. 'Anything I can do for you?' Naddalin looked me up and down.

Before, as I could respond, Lexy strutted over to us and wrapped her arms around Naddalin, giving him a quick peck on the lips. I was shocked, I mean, I thought they broke up! Lexy

turned her head and finally noticed me standing there.

‘Oh hey, I know you!’ She exclaimed, lifting my chin to get a better look at me. ‘You’re that little emo girl that’s going out with Ben, right?’

I opened my mouth to correct her when I heard a voice say, ‘Ew, gross!’ It was Ben’s.

He popped up from somewhere and walked over to us.

‘Why would I want to go out with that little runt for?’

People said that he and Lexy were like sisters, since he had green eyes just like her, only darker and he had the same dark black hair, but it was in a short mop head sort of way. He also had milky pale skin, which sometimes turned red when he spoke, so it made him look like he was blushing, even when he was not.

‘We’re not going out, we’re just friends.’ I clarified.

‘I’m so not your friend, all right? Get that clear!’ Ben cried.

‘But, how can you say that, Ben? We’ve been best friends since we could talk!’

‘Well, that’s all over now, ya hear?’

Fresh tears roll down my cheeks.

‘Aw, Ben, now look what you’ve done, you made the poor little girl cry!’ Lexy joked.

All three of them laughed in my face and soon some other people joined in. I felt so humiliated that I ran into the bathroom and e biggest stall. There I slid down the wall and hid my face in my hands, soaking them with my tears.

Why? Why does this always happen to me? What did I ever do to deserve all this? I thought to myself.

I did not know the answer to all those questions, but I did know how to end it all. I wiped all my tears away then walked over to the sinks, over them were little mirrors. I took one look at them and pictured Ben's face in it with a sneer on his face.

'Do it, I dare ya!' he seemed to be saying to me.

I closed my eyes and punched it as hard as I could be shattering the mirror and sending tiny pieces of glass everywhere. Immediately, pain shot

through my soft skin and felt blood trickling down my arm and onto the clean, white floor. Then, I picked up the biggest shard of glass from the ground and sliced it across my veins. I closed my eyes and dropped to the ground as soon as I heard loud clicking footsteps.

I felt so happy inside then, I felt nothing for a while, but then as I was brought back to life, I felt it again. The pain, the agony, the torture. No, I did not die, I survived it since the cut was not too deep. After that people stopped picking on me, instead they just stared at me with hate in their

eyes. They were all mad at me because I ruined their perfect school rep.

After that, it all went downhill, or so I thought. Ariana decided to send me to a therapist. I protested, but she said it was the only way to fix this mess and ensure that I would never try something like that ever again. I would be meeting her at nine-thirty tomorrow, which means no school for me.

Ariana drove me to the place and then left to get to her job. I sighed and walked up the steps and into the room. That is where I met her, my therapist. She was nice but different from other adults. She was all so peppy

and happy as if nothing could get her down. Her name was Emmailia, I have never heard of a name like that. Emmailia had long black hair and a small fairy-like face, with a slim body and a sweet voice.

I wonder what she will think of me. I thought to myself.

I sighed again and walked forward.

‘Hello there, Keysaha,’ she said when she saw me. ‘Take a seat.’

I sat down on a black leather love seat across from the red one that she was seated at and stared down at

my hands. I had put a skin-tight long-sleeved top and a black hoodie on to hide the bandage on my left wrist, but now as I was sitting in front of Emmailia, I felt like she knew it was there.

‘Now, I understand why you are here but do you?’ She continued.

‘Yes.’ I nodded my head.

‘I hear you’re having problems at school; you want to tell me about that?’

I did not know what to say, should I tell her or not? I mean, I do not

know her, and I do not need her feeling bad for me or anything.

‘Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone, I’m great at keeping secrets. I won’t tell a soul.’ Emmailia joked, putting her index finger to her red lips.

I sighed and stared down at the ground.

‘Take your time, sweetie, I won’t rush you.’

I smiled a little, she was nice. Nicer to me than anyone I have ever met in Greensburg. She was nice to me as a friend, like Ben used to be. Ben, oh Ben, how you changed! Tears sprung

from my eyes and I began sobbing silently.

‘Oh, it’s all right, dear, you don’t need to tell if you don’t wish to.’ Emmailia assured me.

‘I-I hate my life.’ I told her.

Emmailia came over to me and gave me a tight hug, for a while I sat there crying on her shoulder as she stayed still. After a couple of minutes, I stopped and leaned back on the couch. Emmailia got me some soda, I drank it and then handed the glass back to her.

‘Alright, then, are you ready to talk now?’ she asked me.

I nodded my head again. I began telling Emmailia about all that has happened to me since I was eight years old and all the despair, I have been through till now. She listened quietly and nodded a few times as if she understood how it felt to be through all that. When I was done, I was close to starting crying again, but I swallowed back my tears.

'Listen, sweetie, you may think there is no one in this world that is like you, but I know someone that is.' Emmailia told me.

'Who?' I asked curiously.

‘My daughter, she was so much like you that she even did the same thing you tried to.’

I looked up at her and saw Emmailia looking down. She was so young and married? She did not look a day over twenty-eight.

‘I know what you’re thinking, how could a girl so young possibly have a child. Well, I’ve had a few problems with my life just like you,’ she said, looking up and into my eyes. ‘Anyway, I have a question for you, Keysaha.’

‘Yes, what is it?’

‘Who are you currently living with?’

‘With my f-’ I stopped in mid-sentence, thinking back to how Ben said he was not my friend anymore. ‘With Ben and his parents.’

‘Why is that? Don’t you live with your parents?’ Emmailia asked softly.

‘No, I don’t know what happened to them.’ I answered her.

‘Well, then, do you enjoy living with Ben?’ Emmailia said Ben’s name as if it were an unusual name, which it was.

‘Well, his parents are nice, but it’s really hard since Ben is no mean to me now.’

Emmailia’s face broke into a smile and I could see happiness light up in her eyes again.

‘Well, then I have a proposition for you, dear!’ she exclaimed.

‘Would you like to know what it is?’

I nodded my head quickly; I had a feeling that it would be something good just by noticing Emmailia’s sudden enthusiasm. ‘How

would you like to come live with me now?'

'I-I would love to, but I-I don't want to be a bother.' I stuttered.

'Ah, don't worry, it's no big deal! I could always use another hand around the house!' she insisted.

'Well, I guess I could.'

'That is great, I'll pick you up tomorrow with some adoption papers for Ben's parents to sign and we'll be well on our way to California!'

I wondered why Emmailia lived in California if she had a job over here in Pa, but before I could ask, a small

redheaded lady came into the room to tell me that Ariana was here to pick me up.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Keysaha!' Emmailia called.

'Bye!' I called back over my shoulder.

Man, I cannot wait until tomorrow! I thought

The next day, I quickly took a shower and after putting on my clothes, I went to go pack. I looked at my reflection in the mirror one last time.

Hmm, I look good with no glasses and my hair wet. I thought.

I shook my head, smiling, and then walked out of the bathroom. My smile broke and fell when I noticed Ben walking past my room. He stopped for a minute and saw my bag on top of my bed, then up at me. I sighed and looked down, then started walking again. I was about to enter my room when Ben grab my hand.

‘Where are you going?’ He demanded.

‘I-I’m leaving.’ I stuttered.

Ben pulled me close to him and brought his face down to mine.

‘Why?’

‘I’m going to California to go live with Emmailia.’

Ben tightened his grip on my hand and I felt my skin starting to burn, my wound was still not healed yet and still really hurt.

‘Ow, Ben, you’re hurting me!’ I cried.

‘Don’t leave me!’ He shouted.

‘But, I-I thought you didn’t like me.’

Ben cupped my face with one and leaned close to me, his eyes locked on mine.

‘I don’t, but who should I tease when you’re not here?’

‘Ben, your’ I cut myself off when Ben started leaning closer and closer to me.

‘I hate you; I hate you so much Keysaha!’ he said.

Usually, I would have felt hurt if Ben were saying all this to me right now, but right now I felt nothing. I was moving away to a new place, to a new life and I do not need something stupid getting in my way. I knew what Ben was trying to do, he has done this before. When I tried to run away one

time, he made me believe that he still liked me, but it was all just a ploy.

A stupid plan to get me to stay, so he could humiliate and torture me some more with his friends. I pulled myself away from Ben and slammed the door in his face. Then, I began packing my clothes and everything else that I needed.

After I was sure that everything was packed, I grabbed my bags and headed into the kitchen, where I saw Ben eating some toast. He looked up when he saw me with an angry look on his face, but I just looked the other way.

‘Mom, why is Keysaha leaving?’ I heard him ask.

‘Keysaha is going to California, so she can start her life afresh.’ Ariana answered.

‘And you’re just going to let her go!’

‘Yes, we think it’s good for her.’ Emma agreed.

Ding dong the doorbell rang.

‘Oh, that must be Emmailia!’

‘We’ll be back, we just have to sign the adoption papers.’

Emma and Ariana went to go answer the door and I was left all alone with Ben. I knew what was coming and I tried my best to avoid it, but it was of no use. Ben got up and walked over to me, he raised his hand and my body tensed.

'Don't I at least deserve a goodbye kiss?' he asked.

'I-' I cut was cut off by Ben's lips.

He kissed me hard, but I did not kiss him back. I felt nothing for him now. All the love and respect I had for him is now gone and filled with hatred and disgust. I tried biting his lip to get

him to stop, but he still did not. He finally did when he heard Emmailia's voice from the other room.

'I've always liked you, Keysaha, but I was afraid to admit it to you or anyone. I cared more about my rep than I did for you,' he said. 'If you stay now, then I will never get my punishment, so it's better if you just go now and never come back!'

I was shocked to hear that I stood frozen when Emmailia came into the kitchen.

'Ready to go, Keysaha?' She asked me.

‘Huh? Oh yes.’ I stammered.

I took one last look at Ben before I left, and I saw his head down, but he picked it up and I saw his face red. And for the first time I knew it was not because he talked, it was because he meant it. I cannot believe it; I cannot believe Ben elt that way about me. And he decides to tell me when I am leaving! What kind of person does something like that? I blushed as I felt myself forgive him.

I got into Emmailia’s sweet ride, it was a bright red Mustang, which was my dream car. Emmailia got in next to me and turned on the radio.

‘What would you like to dear, sweetie?’ she asked me.

‘Anything is fine.’ I told her.

Emmailia switched through the stations as she drove with one hand, she finally stopped on a song by Metro Station called California. I smiled as I listened and stared out the window.

‘Well, we’re going to be stuck in this car for about twenty-one hours, so that gives us plenty of time to catch up on things. So, you want to tell me what was going on with you and that Ben kid?’

Emmailia and I talked for a while and then I began asking her some questions about her, and I learned a quite lot. I even found out why she lives in California and goes to work so far.

‘Well, you see, Keysaha, I’ve left my daughter in the care of my sister and my agent told me that if I come here, I could get more money,’ she explained. ‘I wasn’t doing so great back in Cali, but now I miss my little girl and I want to get back to her.’

‘Oh. So, what’s your daughter like?’ I questioned.

‘Ah, Petunia’s had a few problems in her life, much like me, but

now it’s all good. Now she has some friends who take of her and love her, what else could I ask for?’

‘Hmm, nice, Emmailia and Petunia, that sounds cute.’ I commented.

‘You know what sounds cuter?’

‘No, what?’

‘Emmailia, Petunia, and Keysaha.’

I smiled and leaned over to give her a little hug.

‘You’re going to love her, I promise.’ Emmailia said.

‘I hope so.’ I whispered.

I started the window and looked at the magnificent view.

I wonder what she will be like was my last thought before I drifted off to sleep.

When I woke up again, I yawned and stretched a little, before sitting up in my seat to get a better look at where we were. Well, I was not sure if you were in California yet or not, it was hard to tell. I turned around and looked for Emmailia, she was not in her seat. I heard a small yawn from the back seat and turned to look over there, and there she was.

‘Hey, girl, how’d ya sleep?’ she asked me.

‘Fine.’ ‘You?’ I answered.

‘Great. But I think we should get back on the road.’

‘How much longer are we going to be here? I’m starving.’

‘A few more hours and do not worry, while you were sleeping, I got us some food.’

Emmailia stepped over and plopped down on her seat and started the engine. She handed me a burger and a medium-sized soda before she started to drive again. For the

remaining hours, I ate, drank, stared out the window some more, and even thought about Ben for a while. Once we finally got to Emmailia's beautiful mansion, which I still do not know how she got this much money from, I was so totally pooped! I was so tired, I could hardly stand, Emmailia had to practically drag me into the house.

'Wait here, I'll find Petunia, all right?' she said to me leaving me in the hall.

I nodded, at least I did. I looked around the house a little with my eyes half-open. Suddenly, I found myself on the ground. I opened my eyes to see a

guy right on top of me! I blushed as I realized that I must have looked like a total mess in front of such a cute guy like him.

‘Oh, I-I’m so sorry!’ He apologized, rushing to get off me.

‘It-it’s fine.’ I said.

The guy held out his hand, I took it and he helped me up. I looked to the side and saw two other girls there, I assumed one of them was Petunia. Emmailia walked into the room and looked at all of us together.

‘What’d I miss?’ She asked.

‘Nothing, just the fact that Mac just squashed my new sister!’ Petunia answered.

She practically ran over to me and grabbed me in a huge hug.

‘Hi, my name’s Petunia and you are?’

‘Being hugged to death!’ I checked out.

Petunia released me, and I huffed.

‘Yeah, she has the habit of doing that a lot,’ the other girl added.

‘My name’s Susan.’

Had petunia the same long black hair and brown eyes as her mother and Susan had layered brown hair and the cutest purple eyes?

Part: 15

‘Hi, my name is Keysaha.’ I said.

‘And this is my brother-’ Susan was cut off by the guy.

‘Mac.’ He answered, smiling at me.

Marco held out his hand and I shook it.

‘Nice to meet you all.’

‘Hey, what happened to your hand?’ Mac asked me.

Both girls turned to look at me and my hand.

‘Oh, I-I just...’

‘Ah, Keysaha, you must be tired! Petunia, go show Keysaha to your room.’

‘Alright, mom!’

Petunia took my hand and then took me upstairs to her room. Her room looked great, it was all decorated with band posters and stickers with celebrities on them. It was like Hollywood Heaven! There was only one

bed though, I stared at it and soon enough Petunia had noticed.

‘Oh, didn’t mom tell you? You’re going to be sleeping in my room tonight and then mom is going to buy you a bed tomorrow to put in your new room!’ she explained.

‘Oh, so where will you be sleeping?’ I looked around to see if there was any space for her to sleep; there was not.

‘Floor.’

‘Oh, I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to take your bed away.’ I apologized.

‘Eh, no worries, it’s only for one night.’

‘You sure there’s no room for the both of us?’ I suggested.

‘Yeah, I guess we could.’ She agreed.

For a while, Petunia and I stayed up talking, and then came the subject back to my arm, I thought of a way to avoid by asking her a question.

‘So, Mac?’ I asked slowly.

‘Oh, he and his sisters are our neighbors and my best friends,’ Petunia answered. ‘And I’m kind of the reason he fell on top of you. Sorry.’

‘Hey, it’s all right, I forgive you.’

‘Oh, we’re going to have the best time together!’ Petunia grabbed me into another hug and this time I did not care how tight she was holding on to me.

I have never felt this loved one day by a person I just met a few hours ago. I am going to like it here, but I really should not get my hopes up too high.

‘I hope you don’t mind; I listen to music at night, it helps me fall asleep.’

‘No, no, it’s fine.’

I have always wanted to do that back at Ben’s house, but Ben did not like my music and he did not want me disturbing his ‘beauty sleep.’

So, anyway, the two of us both soon fell asleep to ‘About A Girl’ by The Academy Is... When I woke up in the morning, I felt so groggy, so I decided to go take a quick shower and when I was coming back to Petunia’s room - with new clothes on, hair wet, and no glasses - I met Mac again.

‘Hey morning,’ he said, smiling sweetly.

‘Hi…’ I replied sweetly.

He was cute and seeing him made me feel all flustered up because he was the first guy to ever talk to me in so long! Mac had the skater boy haircut and the emo-like clothes. His eyes were a light shade of blue and his lips were a rosy pink. In one hand was a can of soda and in the other was a small bag of cookies. Watching him eat, made me feel hungry, but I promised myself that I would be a better person here. I am going to change my personality and be nothing like the person I am back home.

Anyway, after we all three girls ate breakfast together, Emmailia went mattress shopping at Sleepy's and Petunia took me out site seeing. After that, we went back home, and I got to see my new room. So far, there was not a single thing in there, well except for my bed, which seemed to have camouflaged in with all the white walls.

'So, what do you think?' Petunia asked me.

'It's so... clean.' I managed.

Petunia laughed and pulled me inside.

‘Come on, I’ll help you trick it out like mine.’

‘Can we help too?’ I heard a voice say.

Petunia and I turned around and saw Susan and Mac in the doorway.

‘Hey, the more the merrier.’ Petunia said.

I just nodded my head.

We sat around for a while, deciding what to do first.

‘Well, I think the first thing to do would be to paint it, that way it’d be easier.’ Susan pointed out.

So, it was decided, first we would paint, then we would pull in all the furniture and other stuff.

‘So, what color would you like?’ Petunia asked me.

‘Hmm, blue and black.’ I answered.

‘Alright, so do you want like half the walls black and the other half blue?’ Susan asked.

‘I don’t know, that’d look a little weird, I think.’

‘Oh hey, I have an idea! Why don’t we paint all the walls blue and

then splatter black on them?' Mac suggested.

'Yeah, that'd be great!'

We all started and then finished an hour and a half later, when we were done, we were all starving.

'Hey, kids, how about some ice cream?' Emmailia asked, coming into the room with four scones of ice cream; two in each hand. 'What flavor would you like Keysaha?'

My first instinct would be to say chocolate, but then I remembered what I had promised myself and changed my answer to strawberry since

I hated vanilla. After we finished our little lunch, Mac helped haul all the furniture into the room, since he was the only guy and he was the strongest out of all three of us.

Right now, I had a little white drawer, a white walk-in closet, and lots more! It looked so awesome and it was so much improved than my old house. I was so tired that as soon as my head hit the pillow, I fell asleep. When I woke up again around eight-thirty, I went to get a drink of water from downstairs. When I walked past the living room, I heard Emmailia and Petunia talking, I did not want to eavesdrop on their

conversation, but I stopped when I heard them talking about me.

‘Listen, sweetie, Keysaha is going to be going to your school in two days, so make sure you take care of her.’ Emmailia said.

‘I will mom, don’t worry!’ Petunia assured her.

‘Don’t leave her anywhere and help her find her classes, and especially don’t let Milly get anywhere near her. You remember what she did to you, and I don’t need another incident from Keysaha.’

‘I promise I won’t.’

I gasped when I heard that I had to go back to school and that too to a school with another popular girl. I went back up to my room and thought about this.

Oh, what am I gonna do? I thought.

I was about to finish the last bite of my tuna sandwich when Jai, my Korean BFF, nudged my elbow sharply on the cafeteria table. I managed to pop the remaining sandwich into my mouth and asked her, ‘What?’ With my mouth full.

She gave me a disapproving look. Jai always picks on me for my lack

of table manners so just to piss her more, I chewed on the food deliberately with loud munching sounds. ‘What?’ I asked again.

‘He’s staring at you?’ She said briefly in her halting English then turned away to look down on her plate.

‘Who?’

I was silently hoping it was not Mr. Vagner, our High School principal. He was monitoring me because I was behind with my school tuition all the time. He was worried if my mom was still being an irresponsible mother. What did go wrong now? Surely, the school year had just started?

I pondered on the question as I was forced to swallow the suddenly tasteless sandwich down my throat. I ducked to peek over my shoulder. Well, nothing was unusual. The cafeteria was packed with students eating their lunches. Same as all the other lunch breaks all year round.

With one exception. The day when Jai transferred to Providence High School two years ago. Everybody was curious about the new Korean girl who could hardly even speak English.

I whirled back to Jai. ‘Who?’

She shrugged and moved her eyes toward the far end of the

cafeteria. I followed her gaze and suddenly my heartbeat quickened as blood rushed to my face.

Therefrom the table at the far end of the cafeteria was Gabriel Sinclair. He was oblivious to his football teammates who were laughing and joking around with each other as he openly stared at me.

It was as if my stomach lurched up to my throat. It was funny my first instinct was to wipe my mouth, fearing my tuna sandwich had left a crumb somewhere.

I heard Jai stifled a laugh. My blush deepened. I wished I had listened

to Jai's lessons about table manners before it was too late. Gabe thought how so un-lady-like I was, gobbling down my food carelessly and talking with a mouth full.

But wait. Why should I care about what this Mr.?

Popular thought about me?

The deep blush was still on my face, but I was a little angry now than embarrass. I stared back at him fiercely giving him the 'okay-so-I-am-like this… so-what?' stare. He seemed to flinched from my irritated gaze as our eyes locked. He looked away abruptly.

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ I asked accusingly at Jai.

Her cute chancy eyes seemed to sparkle with amusement. It annoyed me even more.

‘I did tell you.’ She pointed out. She was right.

‘You didn’t tell me it was Gabe.’ I was still angry at her even so that I did not want to simply just dropped the subject.

‘So now it was my fault?’ She hissed and rolled her eyes.

‘Yes.’ I snorted.

I took a careful peek again towards the last table on the far end. He was not looking at me anymore. I was relieved, but a pang of disappointment was mingling on my thought. What had he been thinking to stare at me like that?

I am no raving beauty at all. Being the only half-Filipino over two thousand plus of the student population, it should have been an advantage, I knew a lot of people who remarked how beautiful my olive skin was- (which I got from Mom) only if my hair did not go as wild as it was forming a riot of Halo over my head

and only if my eyes were an assorted color rather than black or if my lips were only a little thinner...

Seriously, what had he been thinking?

Why the sudden interest? He just thought I was funny or worse ‘gross.’ I did not care.

‘He was staring at you as if it were the first time, he laid eyes on you... that’s creepy!’

I looked back at Jai and gave her a frozen stare. She ignored me.

‘Maybe he just thinks I’m pretty.’ I made a face. Flinching from my own words. Hah!

‘Yeah dream on, Mya. He doesn’t even know you exist!’

I bit my lip from Jai’s harsh words. This was the trouble if you did not keep secrets with your best friend. Sometimes she knew too much to the point it was already irritating. But then I knew she was right.

Gabe and I went to the same school ever since we were Naddalin sets but I did not remember even once that he talked to me or called my name. Whenever I came over to their house to

babysit his little brother, he would not even bother to greet me. It was like he did not know me. His behavior bothered me sometimes, but I have too many problems to linger on his abnormal treatment. But now, Icould nott help thinking, somethingwas nott right. Not right at all.

'Well, maybe he does 'now'.' I insisted on her; I was hurt hearing the truth right from someone else's mouth. Even if that someone was your best friend who knows you inside out.

'Yeah, yes.'

The bell rang, signaling that lunch was over. I was glad to finally get

to my feet and stomped off to our next class. Jai was right beside me. Before I finally got out of the cafeteria walls, I took one last look at the back of the room.

Gabe and his friends were still at their table with no plans of moving out. I marveled quietly at how ‘too good’ he looked; he was like a movie star among his commoner’s friends. I sighed, careful not to let Jai heard me. Just as I was about to look away, Gabe turned his head to look at me. His blue eyes held a thousand words as it lingered on me for a few seconds.

Then he smiled.

I waved goodbye to Jai as school ended but my mind was somewhere else the whole time after the cafeteria incident.

I could not take out how Gabe looked at me earlier in the cafeteria. Or how his eyes held mine for brief seconds but were enough to muddle my thinking. And there was, of course, his smile.

It was the first time in more than ten years he smiled at me. It was like he just snapped out from his snob behavior and acknowledged for the first time that we knew each other or knew

each other's faces at least. I was a little nervous now.

Tomorrow, I would be spending my time at Sinclair's to babysit little Robbie. Gabe's parents were both working on a highly-paid job in the city and it was the nanny's day off, so I was too relieved of her duty. I needed the job anyway, considering the situation we were in right now. I was lucky I got the job, but I guess no one else in the area needed a job as badly as I do.

It was Friday and I have another part-time job before tomorrow.

Every after school, I would go over to dear Mrs. Hendricks to walk

her two labradors. Mrs. Hendricks lived alone in her tiny home five blocks away from school after Mr. Hendrick died. She was too lonely that she decided to get two dogs for company and protection as well. Since she could not keep up with her dogs (the old lady was about over 60, I think), she paid me 40 dollars a week to walk her dogs every after school. Sometimes, I would stay with her a little while over after just to chat with her over tea and her most delicious cookies. She was too sweet, sometimes I wish mom were like her. The thought often left a hole in my chest.

It was a bit cloudy today in Providence, the dark clouds were casting shadows over the place making it looked like 6 P.M rather than 3:20 P.M. now, and then a cold breeze would whirl my hair around my shoulders making it wilder than ever. I tugged at my- lose hair desperately, wishing I had something to bind it with. I was silently hoping; it would not rain as I quickened my steps to reach the small house I could almost see now over the hill.

Dear Mrs. Hendrick would be quite devastated if I turned around now and went straight home instead. I would be devastated as well, I hated

making the old lady feel sad. I could not walk the dogs in this condition, but I could stay over for a while to keep her company in this condition. Hugging myself, I walked on faster as the first thunder cut across the graying sky.

The first drop of rain fell right onto my button nose. I wrinkled it and the drop trickled down to my lips. As it did that, the rest came pouring down heavily. I scrambled to my feet reeling around looking for somewhere to hide, but I saw nothing but trees and road signs. The jacket- I was wearing was thin and unable to protect me from this sudden downpour.

‘Mya!’

Somebody shouted my name from above the roaring of thunder and rain or was it just the wind? I could not have distinguished. I broke into a run.

‘Mya!’ Again, the voice was calling my name. I slowed down to a half-walk half-run pace as I listened harder to where the voice came from. Then out from nowhere, a blue sports car blocked my way. I froze not from the cold but by fear. I heard stories about young girls kidnapped and forced into white slavery. My teeth chattered as I braced myself. The car looked

familiar though. I must have seen it somewhere.

‘Get in the car!’ A handsome face appeared on the passenger’s window. His blond hair almost golden and his eyes... they were the bluest shade of blue.

I knew I just look funny because my jaw dropped- literally.

Gabriel Sinclair?

‘Get in the car please, you’ll get soaked.’

I blinked in disbelief. I fought hard to shake myself from the stupor and finally managed to make my legs

moved towards the car door. What was he doing here? I bit the question back as I slid into his car. I was almost wet and cold, and the inside of his car was warm and smelled of leather. I could not stop staring at him in disbelief. Was this a sick joke of his or something?

'For a moment there, I thought you would just stand there and I would have to carry you.' His blue eyes were amused as he turned to look at me. Was he talking to me? A part of me was a bit thrilled but I stopped myself and faked watching my face in his rearview mirror and was horrified.

The wind had taken its toll on my hair and not even the dampness was able to smooth it down a little bit. I blushed with embarrassment in silence. Peering at him from my peripheral vision, I tried to smooth down the wild disarray, but it would not budge. With an inward groan, I gave up, I did not see the point anyway. I did not care if he finds me unattractive.

'Where are you heading to? I thought your house is in the opposite direction.' He asked.

'To Mrs. Hodicks.' Surprised how my voice sounded so casual, I wish he would stop asking questions. This

was extremely uncomfortable to me at least for I could see he was not bothered at all. ‘I sort of have a part-time job. I walk her dogs every after school.’

He nodded gearing the car to life. ‘Okay. But I doubt you will be able to walk her dogs today, would you rather I take you home?’

‘I wanted to stay with her for a little while.’ I admitted. I was getting more comfortable. It was the warmth.

‘I’ll take you there.’

I mumbled my thanks as Gabe stepped on the gas.

Mrs. Hodrick was waiting anxiously, sitting on the front porch of her house. In her hands were two red umbrellas. My heart melted at the thought that somehow, even in this weather, she was hoping I would still come along. The poor Mrs. Hodicks. I blinked the tears as Gabe stopped the car right in front of her house.

'Thanks.' I said, turning to him.

'My pleasure.' He was smiling at me like he was enjoying a private joke but there was tenderness in his eyes. I chased the thought away.

I saw Mrs. Hodicks stood and walked towards his car; her face was

wondering. I unfastened my seatbelt and rolled down the window. Her wrinkled face lit up when her squinting eyes laid upon me. Relief and happiness rolled into one.

'Mrs. Hodicks.' She handed me the second umbrella she was holding when I opened the door.

'Oh dear, why did you come in this weather?' Her voice was soft with worries and joy at the same time.

I smiled at her. 'I wanted to eat some of your cookies.' So far, hers was the best I ever tasted.

That seemed to put off her anxiousness as I was hoping it would. She broke into a wide smile. ‘I didn’t forget. You can take as much as you want, and I’ll give you the rest to take home.’ She suddenly remembered the car I was riding with and peered on the window to look inside. ‘And who is this young man?’

I was lost for words. I certainly could not count him as a friend, could I?

‘My name is Gabe Sinclair ma'am.’ He was sensing the hesitation, he volunteered. ‘It’s nice meeting you.’

‘Oh, you’re not coming inside?’ Mrs. Hodicks pouted her lips like a little girl who was not able to get the doll she wanted.

‘I-uh-m…’ Gabe looked at me for help.

I looked away, unable to decide if I wanted him to stay or not.

‘Would you rather be somewhere else?’ Dear Mrs. Hodicks looked like her heart was broken.

Gabe shook his head instantly.

‘Then there is no reason you shouldn’t stay. Come along kids.’ She walked ahead of me in her dragging

steps and I was left out there thinking I only had but one umbrella.

When I turned to Gabe, he looked like he was fighting to stifle a laugh. I started to frown but I caught myself in time, thinking he was being such a nice person by offering me a ride. It would be so ungrateful if I scowled at him after everything he did. I slowly walked to his side of the car to let him share the umbrella.

He made sure every door and window was locked before he stomped out. ‘Thanks,’ He said. ‘This is genuinely nice of you.’ He added as he

held onto the umbrella, in the process our hands almost touched.

Making sure I left a decent gap between our bodies, I nodded pressing my lips together.

He smiled cocking his head and I felt dizzy as his unique sweet male scent invaded my nostrils. This was the first time that I was this close to a guy. An extremely attractive guy for that matter. I was having a tough time stopping myself not to sniff on him on our way in. I moved away from him as far I could the moment, we reached the covered porch. He was openly studying

my reaction. One corner of his mouth curled into a soft smile.

‘Do I smell bad to you?’ He asked aloud, but he did not take a sniff on himself. He was aware that he smelled too good to me.

‘Why were you on the way here?’ I ignored him, breaking the tension that starts to set in. I was meaning to ask him this, anyway. I knew our houses were supposed to be in the opposite direction.

‘I saw you.’

My almond eyes opened wide. Baffled. ‘What?’ I blurted out a little too

loud. I felt suddenly angered by his snooping on me. If he were. But in the cafeteria and nowhere... I was almost positive he was snooping on me. I did not like attention. Much more his. ‘You were following me?’

Again, his gorgeous blue eyes danced with amusement staring me straight in the eyes. ‘Yes.’

‘Why?’ I demanded harshly. Oh, let him get the idea that I did not like any more of this sudden interest in me. I was not his type at all. I knew how his ex-girlfriends looked like. Blond-Haired Person... Perfect... Popular.

Just like him.

‘I saw you heading in the wrong direction in the wrong weather.’ He was smiling now. Too sweetly for my benefit.

So, he thought I was stupid or out of my wits that was why he was following me?

I groaned inwardly.

Mrs. Hodicks opened the door and interrupted us. ‘What is taking you, kids, too long? Come on in.’

I shrugged and left the umbrella on the floor as I scrambled inside.

Gabe was following me, still smiling.

My mouth watered as soon as we entered the stuffy living room. On the small coffee table near the brick fireplace sat a full plate of freshly baked chocolate cookies. Good Mrs. Hodicks. She ushered us by the fire.

‘Sit down and make yourselves comfortable. I’ll get the tea.’

‘Let me help you, Mrs. Hodicks.’ Gabe was already on his feet when he offered.

‘Oh no- no, you kids keep yourselves warm. You both look like

you need it.’ She disappeared into the kitchen door adjoining the living room.

I moved closer to the flickering fire. Mrs. Hodicks was right. I was too cold inside my wet clothes, my teeth almost chattered. Spreading my palms over the fire, I heard Gabe said.

‘You have to get out of those wet clothes.’ I was thinking about the same thing, but too bad I did not bring any extra with me. I do not suppose Mrs. Hodicks had something to fit me either.

‘Thanks’ but I’m fine.’ I lied. And I was a bad liar. I sat crossed-legs

near the fireplace, hoping the cold would go away.

‘Here.’

I turned to look over my shoulder. He was extending an arm towards me. A gray jacket was in his hand. The same one he was wearing a moment ago. I blushed. Touched by his concern. But shook my head.

‘No, I’m fine really.’ I held my stand. Though I was dying to grab the clothing he was offering. I bet the jacket would smell just like him. I fought hard with the urge.

‘Go on, Mya. Take it.’ The hard and firmness in his velvet voice startled me.

I reached for the piece of clothing awkwardly. ‘Thanks’ I mumbled quietly.

‘Did anyone ever tell you; you suck at lying?’ When I looked up to his face, he was smiling again.

‘Many times.’ I grumbled. He laughed. I blushed even more.

‘Then don’t lie. People will know any way you aren’t telling the truth.’ He stretched his long body on the couch.

He looked comfortable that, I thought it was unfair. I removed the thin wet jacket over my equally thin t-shirt. I replaced it with his and my mind was floating as his now-familiar scent assaulted and enveloped me.

Oh crap, now I am addicted to his smell!

Dear Mrs. Hodicks appeared on the door carrying a tray with the smoking teapot on it and three little teacups. Gabe was instantly on his feet taking the tray from her. The sweet old lady smiled her thanks and settled comfortably in an armchair beside the fireplace. As soon as Gabe placed the

tray down on the table, I dived into it to get down something hot inside me and chase the cold away. Happily, I sunk my teeth into the soft chocolate cookie and drank my tea too greedily, it burned my throat.

'Why, you didn't tell me you have a boyfriend, Mya.'

I choked. Not from the hot tea and cookie. I could almost see the blood rushing through my face. My cheeks burned.

'He-' Darn. I was too embarrassed to even look at Gabe. What had he been thinking? 'He isn't-

my boyfriend, Mrs. Hodicks.' Finally, I was able to make out the words.

Mrs. Hodicks chuckled. 'Ow, that's a shame.'

I anxiously nibbled on my cookie hoping she would stop there and let it drop, but to my chagrin, she added, 'You both looked good together. You should go out like this often.'

'Actually, he just accidentally went on my way. We were not together. It was too kind of him to give me a ride.' I put too much emphasis on my words and was out of breath when I finished.

Gabe was happily munching on a piece of cookie, a stupid smile on his face. I fought the urge to throw mine to him. He should not let the girl explained situations such as these to an old woman.

'Is that it, Gabe?' Mrs. Hodicks did not want to be put off.

Smiling, Gabe looked at me studying my face. I must look like a monster ready to gobble him up with any wrong move. His smile widened in amusement.

'I sort of followed her, actually.' He said finally. He looked

away, refusing to see the horror washed my face. Do not you dare…!

‘Because,’ I… wanted to know her better.’ His eyes turned serious as he spoke. I had a gut feeling the words were not meant for Mrs. Hodicks at all.

‘Oh, you’ll be surprised at what you’ll find. Mya is such an interesting, lovely little lady. You’ll lose your heart the moment you’ll see what she truly is.’ There was too much sincerity, too much pride in her voice I forgot all about Gabe as turned to Mrs. Hodicks.

‘Thank you,’ I choked on the emotion that was gripping me tightly. I always know, Mrs. Hodicks was an old

lonely lady craving for somebody to talk to, walk her dogs for her, but knowing I was special to her like I was her child, shook me from the very core of me.

She slowly cupped my face with one unstable, wrinkled hand. ‘It’s true dear. I always know you are special. And I love you as my own.’

I closed my eyes as my mind drifted to somewhere else. Sweet nostalgia. My mom used to be like this when I was a kid… mom… but the memories were too far away now. I opened my eyes slowly and a pair of the bluest eyes stared back at me. Gabe

had moved behind Mrs. Hodicks, his eyes a liquid pool of mixed emotions.

I looked away quickly, hating him see thru me at my most vulnerable moment.

I emanated Mrs. Hodick's hand and I moved towards the fire again, turning my back on them.

Mrs. Hodicks was talking to Gabe about her dogs and how to behave and orderly they had been ever since sometimes she thought they were humans and not animals. Their quiet exchange of words was enough to calm my wracking nerves.

‘So, you go to school together?’

‘Since kindergarten.’ Gabe handed a cup of hot tea to the old lady.

‘My that was too long ago, how come you only see Mya just now, Gabe? I am extremely disappointed.’ Mrs. Hodicks made a clicking sound of her tongue.

I could feel a hole forming on my back, knowing they were both staring at me. Darn. I just hope they would stop talking about me like I was not there at all. But for some ridiculous reason, I could not make myself turn and let them knew I was listening.

‘I think because I was a jerk.’ He chuckled softly as he said that. I desperately wanted to yell at him. But of course, I did not. Not with Dear Mrs. Hodicks around. I made a stuffy sound, closer to a groan. ‘It’s not entirely true, you know.’

I have a gut feeling the last statement was directed to me so I slowly peek over my shoulder and closed my eyes hopelessly as I saw that he was indeed staring at me.

Would you just be kind enough to let the matter drop? I choked on the words.

‘I don’t know where this is heading,’ I frowned. Showing great disdain. ‘I think we should talk about this privately.’

‘Will you talk to me privately?’ He wanted to know.

‘NO.’ I mouthed the word so Mrs. Hendrick could not see. I was just bluffing to end the horrid conversation.

He was silent, and I was a little relieved. Mrs. Hodicks excused herself for a moment to get more tea, firmly ordering us to sit down when Gabe and I started to stand to help her.

I looked sharply at Gabe as soon as she was out of earshot.

‘Why are you being such a jerk!’ My voice was full of hurt and anger. ‘Why do you have to make up stories like that you-you,’ words failed me when I saw how serious he looked.

‘I like you.’ He said so I almost laughed. ‘I liked you all my life.’

I noted the word he was using. Like not love. I was glad he was careful about his words because God knew just how much my hand was aching to hit him hard.

‘Is this a sick joke? Making Ms. Nobody fall in love with Mr. Hot and Popular in a week? How much did you and your friends bet on me? You should make a newer plot. That one sells so many times already.’

‘Mya Shantana Hope… ‘His eyes a mixture of irritation and tenderness as he said my full name. I was out of breath. It was the first time in long years he mentioned my complete name and the impact it made on me was too strong I wanted to roll on the floor laughing and crying at the same time.

Sick; I was too sick for this. God help me.

We said our goodbyes to Mrs. Hodicks. I tried extremely hard to sound casual for the old lady. But my mind was really in a deep predicament. I knew I was always been strong but my strength crumbled to dust when Gabe put us in this situation. The humiliation, anger, and pain were too much for me to handle. And Gabe was doing too good at this I wanted to run away as far as I could from him for my good. The knowledge that he would have to drive me home now did not offer any comfort. It only meant I had to endure all the

way home trying to convince myself I was alone, and he was not there.

Oh, this was crap. I meant what would you call something like this?

He was so unpredictable that I hated every time he did something that was so out of my expectation. And now that stupid smile was back on his handsome face like he did not care what had he done to me. Worse, whenever I peeked in the rearview mirror to quietly study Gabe, he would always catch me stealing glances at him. His smile widened. My face flushed brightly. Was it from

humiliation or anger, I did not know? It was from both.

Before I knew it, Gabe stopped the car in front of our small house. I was angry at myself for being so preoccupied with unwelcome thoughts that I forgot to give him the direction to the house. Luckily, he knew where I lived. Wondering, though how someone who ignored me for more than a decade knew where I lived, I silently gave him credit for that at least.

The heavy downpour of rain had subsided now into soft drizzles. I sighed as I saw that the front light of our house was already on. It was only

ten minutes past five in the afternoon. Mom should not be home from work then. I clutched the ripple of familiar distaste in my stomach.

I planned to get out of the car without saying thanks or goodbye, to let him know I was pissed at him but years of good manners prevailed on me. I mumbled my goodbye as I got out of the car and told him to drive safely. He was already in front of me when I got out, holding my arm.

'Can we talk please?'

I twisted my arm from his hold, darting him an angry stare. 'Just go home, Sinclair.' I barked.

‘I will after we talked.’ He insisted. His eyes, not exactly pleading but I closed mine, fearing I would get lost from the bluest depth of them if I stared too long.

I was anxious to get inside the house. I had a bad feeling mom was in trouble again. I sighed, deciding to just let him talk so this would be over soon.

‘Okay… Talk.’ I gave up. I forced myself to look at his perfect face.

He let go of my arm I was still twisting to free from his grip. Oddly, he looked like he was out of words.

‘What I was saying at Mrs. Hodicks… ‘I looked away at him as he started saying. He let out a deep breath. I steadied myself as the fresh smell of his breath dizzied me. ‘I just wanted you to know, I mean it.’

I nodded my head absent-mindedly, nibbling on my bottom lip. Of course, I was not a fool to believe him.

‘I like you.’

My head snapped at him as he said it slowly, tenderly. His hand lifted to my face but not touching. He looked like he was in pain or something.

‘I liked you ever since we were kids.’ My mouth dropped. How much did he exactly bet on me to be this desperate? I was curious. ‘But something won’t let me tell you what you are to me... ‘He dropped his hand to his side. I just wish he would stop. ‘It’s like I feel something deep in my bones warning me to stay away from you... like something dark will happen if I won’t keep my distance... ‘He laughed dryly. For the first time, I saw Gabe was nervous in front of me. ‘I know it sounds crazy but I wanted to be honest with you as much as I could. I do not want to hide anything from you from now on. I am only tired of ignoring

you when I could not. I just want to do now what I wanted.' At this point, he did not think twice when he touched my flushed face. 'I want to be with you, Mya.'

I blinked hard. I felt a strong pull to believe him but my rational side won the battle and I pushed his hand away.

'Go home Gabriel.' I hated how my voice sounded. It sounded too emotional. Too sensual.

He backed away but there was a hint of glow deep in his blue eyes.

He smiled and without me expecting, pulled me firmly against his chest. I was shocked, unable to protest but found out I was desperate to snuggle against his hard body than I ever wanted to admit. To forget for once, this was all but a dream. Too good to be true.

‘I don’t know what to do about you, Mya Shantana Hope,’ He let out a deep breath. ‘You are so hard to resist, with you I’m like a moth drawn into the fire. Burning would have been such a bliss.’

He let go of me before, I could regain my composure back. His eyes

were dazzling like blue diamonds. I cringed from his gaze, sensing my humiliation.

‘Don’t-,’ I hissed. Concealing my embarrassment. ‘-ever do that again!’ I pushed him so hard but he only laughed as he caught my hands and deposited them against his hard chest. I struggled hard, but I could feel my resolve was quickly fading. I hated how the corner of his mouth curled into a triumphant smile. I hated how my body reacted to him, completely ignoring what my mind was yelling. Most of all, I hated how my heart thudded like crazy whenever he was

too close for my comfort; I hated him. He hated the effect he had on me. I hated Gabriel Sinclair for all that he was doing to me.

I hated myself for thinking that I was too close to believing him.

I hated myself for enjoying this moment with him when I should not.

With all sanity that was left in me, I scrambled to my feet and broke into a run.

She died. And that morning, I had told her that no one would miss her if she did. We always had these kinds of arguments, but I never meant what I

said, and she should not have left me. Every day, I got up with a feeling that reminded me of the murder I had committed. Because if I would not have told her to disappear, God knows where she might be right now.

The worst of it all was not even feeling bad about it, it was knowing that our parents blamed me too.

And so, I got up again, another day of school, but the first sister-less one. I dragged myself down the stairs and had breakfast with only my dad, mom had left early for work, he said, but we all knew she was just avoiding me.

‘Do you want me to drop you off at school?’ He asked.

He was just doing that to be polite, he would not want to be seen with the kid who killed his sister, no one wanted that, let alone the father of both children.

‘It’s okay’ I said, but I knew he was not even paying attention to me, he already knew I would not be joining him anytime soon.

Part: 16

She and I used to go by bike, together, every single day. Except for that one day, when she raged- and I

yelled, and she left. She never made it to school.

So-o, I make my way to the garage, all alone, and take out my bike. Spiders have been feeling at home while I was staying home to more the loss of a loved one. They give you three weeks off nowadays, even when you are the main reason they are gone, in prison I would get way longer.

I tear the spider's webs and homes apart because that is what the bloody truck did to mine. It is too soon to make jokes about how bloody it was, I have never been at the scene of the crime. I have decided to avoid it and

take the high road to school. What are the odds though, that you piss off your sibling, and that she decides to leave, and ran her bike into a truck that just happens to be there right that minute? Itwas nott even his fault, so whavehavet to apologize for the dirt on his vehicle. I am I amsorry you do not know where the fucking brakes are and killed my sister, here let me clean that up for you. Dirt-bag, at least he and his stupid ride match.

Her bike was still in the garage, I do not know why my parents insisted on taking it home, it does not even look like a bike. It is just a pile of

metal rods and it made me feel uncomfortable because I swear you could smell her blood throughout the entire house, that is what they aimed for, to make me feel guilty and never forget what I had done. While passing it, I kicked it hard and had to keep myself from screaming.

The bike looked horrible, just imagine what she would have looked like. I never got to see her because it was too bad. And apologizing to a coffin was not one of the things on my to-do list, so I did not do anything but stare right in front of me and wish the ceremony ended, as fast as she had

done. It had taken the police about a week to gather all her pieces together, at least that is when my parents started taking it out on me, instead of panicking that she would not be able to go to Heaven because she was missing a toe or something.

I had forgotten how long the high road was. And how hell-a boring it was to go somewhere all by yourself. I hope you are happy now, I thought. Everyone always feels sorry for the one who dies, but that is the effortless way out, believe me.

It was 8 o’clock when someone rang the doorbell. There was dead

silence throughout the entire house because of the argument that my sister and I had had.

She had been talking about that girl again, and she just went on, and on about it, she never stopped. I had been telling her to shut up about it for about two months when she finally crossed the line. That morning, I started yelling at her. And we are so much alike, once we get into an argument, it is serious, so she did the same to me.

Our parents were downstairs while she started throwing with my stuff, and I grabbed her and told her

she was a hideous creature, she called me the same names, but in the end, all that mattered is what I did.

My mother put her cup of tea down, got up, and slowly made her way to the door. My dad looked at me in disgust because I happen to yell way louder than her, he had only heard the terrible thing I had said, the one thing that made her take off.

‘Yes- she did’ I heard my mother say to someone who spoke very rapid and low, inaudible.

‘About half an hour ago maybe, not more’ she added.

‘Yes- that’s her,’ her voice started trembling.

‘What do you mean?’ she started tearing up.

I wanted to get up and ask what was going on, but my dad did first and made me sit back down. It all seemed serious, so I listened to him but also the conversation in the hallway.

I heard him join the conversation by asking what was going on. The police officer told him what he had told my mother just a minute ago. They were incredibly quiet, probably because they knew I would try and eavesdrop. But what I could hear, was

more than enough to get up anyways, and run towards the front door.

Part: 17

‘SHE WHAT???’

‘Sir please, we’re trying-’

‘Finn, I told you to stay inside.’

‘Dad, she’s my sister, I should know whatever this is.’

My mother nodded- and dad lets go of me. We all looked at the man in uniform, standing in front of us.

‘I’m deeply sorry.’ That was all he said. Everything I heard before my mother thanked him and closed the

door. But I needed more, what was he apologizing for, she could not just have-

'Finn, I think it's best if you go to your room. Now. Please.' I had never seen my mom in this state of shock.

'No, mom, I'm staying here, I've- like- like…'

'You've done enough for today. Room. Now!' Well, my dad was not joking around, so I backed off and went upstairs, intending to stay out in the corridor and listen to every single word that would leave their mouths.

'Is that all he said?' my dad asked, and of course my mother could

not properly talk, she was overwhelmed, and the man did not even bring her anything to drink, he just looked at her breaking down in front of him and waited for her answer.

‘He. Said. That. She-’ she paused.

Oh, come on woman hold yourself together, what did he say?

‘She wasn’t looking. She ran right into it.’ then the real breakdown happened.

Into what? Parents cannot ever just tell you what you need to know now, can they? But I had watched

enough series and movies to know what just happened, and I knew she would not be coming back home. Not today, not tomorrow. And the last thing I had ever said to her was that she would not be missed if she would ever leave.

Asshole; I am such an asshole.

It was all I could think about because obviously, I could not picture her running into anything, because of my lack of information.

I went into her room and sat down on her bed. One of the walls was entirely covered with pictures of her and her friends, and even some of me and her. The opposite wall was

practically covered with books, from the floor up to the highest point she could reach when standing on her tiptoes, which was not that high. I looked over at her desk. Her diary was lying in the middle of the table. What happens with all those feelings, I thought, where do her dreams go now?

I heard footsteps; they were coming upstairs. I grabbed the diary and ran out of the room, went to my own, and jumped onto the bed. Not half a minute later my mom came in, and I was not surprised to see her eyes were entirely red and her face all covered in tears. She gestured to the bed, as if she

were asking for my permission to come in and sit down, I made sure she had all the space she needed, and she sat down right next to me.

We stared at everything in my room. Everything but each other. We were so quiet I could hear my dad sobbing downstairs. It was heartbreaking because it always seemed as if he had no emotions at all as if his chest were filled with nothing but an ice-cold stone.

‘She’s not coming back tonight, is she?’

My mother shook her head.

‘Nor tomorrow. Or the day after.’ I added, still staring at the window in front of me. The curtains had been closed for over a week, and now suddenly, it made me feel claustrophobic.

‘Mom.’

I waited for her to look at me, and once I knew she was, I looked back at her. I could not tell if she was still crying, because everything was blurry by now. She wanted to hug me, but I shook her off.

‘What happened?’

She fake-smiled at me. As if she tried to comfort me, or herself, I could not even tell anymore.

‘She was mad when she took off this morning. She decided to go to Mary’s house, and go to school with her, I guess, because it happened on the road close to her house, and she had taken her bike so she was planning on heading to school afterward.’

I wanted to know what had happened to her, and I wanted to be able to picture it, to know what it must have felt like, but I was not ready to hear all about the details. Yet, I never interrupted my mother, because- I

knew how badly she needed to explain to me this, to convince herself of the truth.

‘She was so upset, and she wasn’t looking, or paying attention to anything. And then the truck came. He did not even violate any laws; she was the one that should have stopped. But nothing we could ever do will bring her back to us. I’m so sorry Finn.’

This time I let her hug me because the story had hit me like, well, a truck. I was too upset to cry, but there was this lump in my throat and damn how it hurt. People call it a broken heart, so why does it feel like

your entire body is shattered into small pieces? Breathing hurt. Feeling my mom pressed against me, our mother, hurt. What gave you the right to walk out of that door? Who gave you the right to listen to any word your stupid brother says to you? You would be missed, of course, you would be. You will be.

Dear Sam,

Today, I do not know where you are. And that is how it will be from now on. Clueless guessing and hoping. Nothing but constantly wondering.

People believe in lots of things. Reincarnation, Heaven, a big black

hole... Do you remember our theory? We called it 'The Other Side.'

Just in case you do not, it was about closure. So, when the deceased person felt as if the survivors were not ready to let go yet, he or she would watch over them. That would mean that you would be right here, next to me, watching me write and struggle, and tear apart everything right after finishing it. If you would be here, I mean, it would be kind of soothing, but it could never take away the pain of what I have done to you.

You should know, that ever since our last fight and you are

slamming the door and running off, you are all and everything that has ever been on my mind. Non-stop. And I miss you. Gosh, I hate missing you, but I cannot make it stop.

Dad and Megan blame me, too, you know. Too, because so do I. Not a day will ever feel normal again, it will never be right. They always preferred you and somehow lost the wrong child. Must be hard, considering it is their other child's fault and they will have to look at him for the rest of their days, wishing it were you.

They do not talk to me, like at all. In the beginning, Megan tried, but

it is just too hard to pretend we have something to talk about. Dad somehow convinced her not to talk to me again, you know -knew- how persuasive he can be. Especially when he is drunk and aggressive.

It is as if I am dead to them. Excuse my poor choice of words, please.

Tomorrow will be my first day in school, after three weeks off. As if you can put a time limit on grieving.

Mary has tried to call, several times, but I have been ignoring her she was your friend, not mine. I have not heard from David, so it will be one hell

of a lonely day. Nothing new for that matter.

Yesterday was my first day outdoors. I went for a walk because our house is hell-a depressing these days. Dad tried to clean your room but stopped after as much as three minutes.

There was this poster at the corner of the street. Your favorite band will be in town next week. If I could, I would buy us a ticket, I would take you everywhere you wanted to go.

Oh Sam, won't you please come back to me?

I hate missing my little Hazel.

’Finn, get up, you’re late again!’ This had turned into a routine. Somehow, I could never manage to get out of bed, even though I used to need fifteen minutes and now take over forty.

‘Finn, up yet?’ My dad had always given me the impression that he did not enjoy my company, but after my sister’s death, he had done nothing but proving that statement.

‘On my way, calm down.’

In this house, it was considered a crime to tell my dad that very thing. You do not just tell the man to calm

down without a fight. He had, however, lost some of his aggression after the accident. As if something inside of him snapped, the last string that was holding him together.

'You have ten minutes before school starts, you do realize I'm not dropping you off, right?' Was the first thing I heard when finally reaching the kitchen, having tossed on the first thing I saw, namely the same pair of jeans I had been wearing for the last two weeks of depression and school.

'Eat, then, please.'

I had seen him like this, once before. It was right after mom's death.

He has never fully recovered from that, started looking for solutions and affection elsewhere, and ended up marrying the far too young Megan. Sam had always liked her because they could have been sisters or best friends, I, however, felt awkward with this sister-from-another mother walking around in my habitat. Especially when you think about her relationship with my father. Babysit: yes, mother: no.

‘Megan still not back?’ I asked with a mouthful of toast.

‘No. And it seems like she won’t be, for quite a while.’

‘What, isn’t she supposed to be there for you in good and bad days?’

He gave me the glare of death, so I quit. It just was not fair that she could decide to walk away from the drama, so the two of us would get sucked in even deeper. Even if she would just be here to watch TV or make dinner, the house would already be less depressing.

‘Son, you should get going. I’ll be late tonight enjoy your day.’ He said that while grabbing his car keys and walking off as if I did not know he would be late. He had been, ever since Sam stopped coming back home.

‘Later.’

~*~

I hated these streets. And God, how I disgusted the metal bikes were made of. I wanted to burn out every single truck on the surface of the planet, watch them explode. See them die, helplessly, the way they made my sister feel when she tried to take her last breath. Or as she tried to continue breathing but had no choice but to give in.

Cars kept honking at me, all the way to school. The slow boy, the depressed boy, why his sister and not him, nobody wants him around anyway.

Those horns said more than people ever dared to.

I put my bike a hundred meters away from school. The first week of my return, it got trashed four times, and the fifth time, they just hung it upside down with locks of other ‘nerds’ making it impossible for all of us to go home by bike. These people were my only chance of having an actual social life in this saddening last year of high school, but they all walked off as soon as they figured they would be stuck with me if they wanted to wait for the principal’s arrival.

My dad had been called several times and was more in the school building that I, myself, had been lately.

'It's been hard on him, losing his sister.' Was his explanation, every single time. But all the head could reply was: 'These things happen, and we're deeply sorry for your loss, but if Finn can't handle it, then he shouldn't be here right now.'

They gave him clear messages, in the trend of: 'send the boy to an institution if you don't feel like losing both your kids in one-month time.'

He had never told me that, but I had seen the documents they gave

him. They were spread all over the house. Also, I had heard his discussions with Megan, late at night, after he finally got home. I guess Megan somehow managed to drag him home as he was drunk as f-word he does not want me to use, because apparently when you are the only child, you must keep up appearances. Also due to the alcohol running through his veins, mixing with his blood in an uneven proportion, I had found out some things about his fatherly love for me.

‘Do you know how embarrassing that would be? People are already watching. We’ve lost our

daughter, the joy of this home, I can't put him in the madhouse and have all those judgmental questions asked all the time.'

'Think about him, would this be what Finn needs or not?'

'Who cares what he needs? He isn't going to tell me, and I'm tired of guessing.'

I entered my class. I was late again, but the teacher did not even bother remarking, as did the students. At the beginning of the semester, Nathaniel, school prick first class, used to squeak in his stupid high-pitched voice: 'Bambi has arrived, all animals

should dance!' Then some of his friends would get up and do this weird uncool dance move that made the girls swoon, somehow. After a while, people got tired of his 'Do you get it, Bambi, because his mom died when he was there' jokes and he had no choice but to stop his lame attempts at being hilarious as hell.

As for now, the only one who might have even looked up as I came in, would have been David. But somehow, he just stopped caring about me. He had not spoken a word to me since the accident, not even a 'hey man, I'm sorry' or whatever friends do in

those situations. He and my sister had always been close, and he and I, we have been friends ever since the first day we met, how can you throw that all away like that?

But then again, I could not blame him. He was the cooler one of our duo, and I had nothing more to lose, considering my formal reputation as both a mom- and sister killer, he still had a chance of having a somehow survivable senior year.

I nodded as a thank you and opened my book on that very page. This was my favorite teacher. It had been the only one asking me how I was, and

even though I hated that question with passion, it made me feel respected. He gave me tasks instead of tests because he knew I was smart enough to pass his class if it were not for the accident occupying my thoughts 500% of the time.

Oh, Sam. Time goes so slow when you feel like crap when you want it to go fast, so you can go back to your cave of misery, where no one watches you. I would say ‘care’ but they do not, so that is that. Where have you been and where did they take you? When will this pain in my chest, that seems to have broken my ribs and shake all their

splinters when I try to breathe in, end? Do you think it ever will?

These kids are horrible. They were at your funeral, all of them. Yet, no one even had the decency to look at me. Do I have ‘I killed my sister’ tattooed all over my forehead, or is it just me? How did you do it, interact? Why could not it be me, I would have taken your place, a million times without even thinking it over. Please come back, or at least temporarily, so you can take me with you as you go again.

She scared the hell of me when she walked in. I jumped up when seeing her.

‘Shit, Megan. Please knock, I had no idea you were home.’

‘Your father is drunk again, couldn’t just let him drive himself into-’

‘Don’t make traffic jokes. Too soon.’

She nodded. ‘What are you doing here? Shouldn’t we be boxing everything up?’

I was in my sister’s room. Looking for something, I do not know what, that would make her come back.

Not necessarily physically, just something that would make me feel as if she were still around.

‘Don’t box it up, it’ll seem so permanent.’ I said it while hiding her diary I had found under my shirt, and making my way to my room.

‘Look, Finn, I know you don’t want to hear this, but death sound pretty permanent to me.’

I did not even bother getting mad at her for saying that, I had to take care of my mission first.

‘Give us some time. Everyone looking at our every move is already exhausting enough.’

With a sigh, she walked off. ‘Don’t tell me I didn’t try.’

‘I won’t.’

I slammed the door, right in her face, because she was not done talking. Once alone, I took the diary in both hands and just stared at it for a minute. She would kill me if she ever found out I had it, but then again, who cares, if I would be dead, I would be closer to her, and further away from everyone else. It is the best thing that could happen to me right now.

Falling into my extremely uncomfortable chair, I opened the lock on the ugly diary. It was pink and fluffy, she must have gotten it when she was about a seven-year-old because, after that, my sister had been manlier than I could ever be.

The first page had a huge red triangle on it, and lots of skulls and exclamation points.

‘IF THIS IS FINN, GET YOUR HANDS OFF OF MY DIARY!!!’

Oh, sis, she knew me too well. It was almost cute of her, to think that this would have stopped me back in the

days when she would still be here to double warn me.

I turned the page, to find another threat on the second page.

‘I MEAN IT, PUT IT BACK, OR I WILL HUNT YOU DOWN!’

Good luck with that, oh evil spirit of my oh-so super dead, aggressive, scary little Sammie-sis.

I laughed at her lame attempts and started reading the third page.

Somehow, it was a relief to figure out she did not start with ‘dear diary’ I might have wanted to slap her if she would have.

Her first story was one of when she was eight. She got the diary for Christmas. I was not that far off with my gamble talent and saying seven. She got it from aunt Sarah, which explains the color and cuddliness. Her first story was about me, and how I had hidden her teddy bear. If she would have made it, survived the accident I mean, she could have perfectly become a writer, because the emotions and exaggeration were simply amazing. I almost felt guilty for something I had done when I was only nine.

‘Finn?’

This was the day of the jump scare, I swear. I slammed the book in one of my slides and sat straight fast.

‘Yeah?’

Megan walked in.

‘Your dad’s fast asleep right now, I think I’m staying here tonight, would you mind?’

‘Of course not, it’s your house too.’

She did not reply, she just made her way to my bed and sat on it. I had to change the sheets; it was almost embarrassing. If this woman would not have been doing my laundry for three

years now, I would have apologized for it.

‘Look, I just wanted to say I’m sorry, for the boxing-thing I mean.’

‘It’s okay, we’re just- I’m just not ready to let go yet.’

She nodded. ‘I know that, but I’m afraid it’ll break you. One day, we will have to face it, that she is not coming back. And if you want, I’ll be there for you until you don’t need me anymore.’

‘Thanks, but it’s just-’

How do you tell someone you wanted to see the body to believe the

stories you have heard? How do you say such a thing without sounding like a straight on psycho- Emmah, just personalization of sadism?

‘-Hard, I know that. But we’ll get there.’

Close enough. I decided to just nod and rest the conversation there. She made that ‘I’m sorry for you’-face, emanated my knee, got up and left with the words: ‘I’ll let you do your homework now.’

Wow… Thanks.

You have always been a little girl. My little sister. How can someone

so small leave such a huge open wound in my chest when leaving? How can you make such a significant difference with that size six of yours?

Day 34 as an only child. The house smelled like pancakes as if we were throwing a birthday party for five-year old's. While making my way downstairs, and taking my usual break at your door, I could not keep myself from looking for balloons and surprises hidden everywhere on and around the stairs. I felt like a boy on Easter, trying to figure out where the eggs could be. The only thing this smaller version of me did not have, was you darting

around, running faster, pushing harder, grabbing all the eggs I had found and accidentally lead you to.

I have had some horrible mornings, such as the one with the officer and his sad news about you, but this one was one to add to the list. I caught Megan and dad in the kitchen, acting annoyingly mad in love. It was the first time that he was up so early on a Saturday, and to be honest, it might have felt good to know that Megan tried to live under our troubled roof again. She did choose to be a part of this family, and there is no way out of

that, except for the Emmah you have taken.

‘We’re going to the park later today, so better eat some more than you’ve been for the last couple of days.’

‘How are you supposed to know that, you’re never around looking at it.’

‘Finn, one day without a fight. Just one.’

This day better be special, I hated my dad’s way of hitting the breaks of whatever conflict I would want to see breaking out.

‘What day is it?’

‘It’s our anniversary, and you’re going to, pretended or not, I don’t care, love it.’

The enthusiasm in his voice made the lonely bite of pancake in my stomach want to climb back up.

‘Why the park, it’s freaking cold outside.’

‘Because that’s where we met.’ Megan replied as if it was the most obvious thing in the entire world, hanging on board, surrounded by neon- and flashing lights.

‘Why not make it somehow romantic and go there yourselves? You

don’t need me to be third-wheeling to feel better now, do you?’

My dad sighed. ‘For God’s sake, Finn. One day is all we ask; can you at least pretend?’

‘That she isn’t dead? That you are not blaming me? Or that she has been living here and taking her oh so motherly responsibilities, deserving this celebration? If she would have stayed when you and I both needed her so much, then I would have thrown a party for the two of you, myself!’

I grabbed the plate with the pancakes, not just mine, but every single one of them, and made my way

back to my room. Halfway, I paused, turned back around, took the stripe, and took off.

'He doesn't mean any of that.' I heard my dad trying as soon as I was out of sight.

'You know, he's right, we shouldn't be doing this. It is too soon for Finn to be enjoying these things, and he had a valid point. I haven't been acting very motherly altogether, while that might have been all he needed from the accident, until now.'

'His mother's death is not your fault, Megan.'

‘No, but banning her voice out of this house, is. She should’ve never been ‘prohibited’.’

I had made myself clear, good. That saved me some serious slamming with the doors and making so much noise the neighbors of our neighbors would drop by telling us to keep it down. Instead of walking into my very own room, I found myself in Sam’s.

It was stronger than me, the need to feel close to her. To touch something that had been in her grip, before she lost the possibility of latching her hands, or whatever is left of those.

Her desk was very messy. Partly because I had been looking everywhere before finding her diary, and because she always wanted to do too much, causing her to take out every single book she had, all at once, covering the wooden table as if they had been the table-cloth.

The wall on the left side of her workspace was covered in photos. From the ceiling to the floor. I recognized some of the faces because I had seen them in school, or our house. Mary was on every single one of them. She was Sam’s best friend and had been, ever since they had first laid eyes

on each other. That must have been when we were about three years old. In the middle, there was a picture of our family, all together. My mother looked so young. She was. Her accident had come as a shock to the entire town, as did the miracle of my surviving skills.

What is it with this family and traffic? What is with me and people dying?

I placed my finger on the picture, covered mom's face with it. I could not even remember what her voice sounded like. Leave alone the taste of her famous pies. Even her smell had faded, Megan had introduced

a brand new one when moving in only half a year after the accident. People thought it was both inappropriate to be moving on this fast and to make two young children grow up without a mother, so dad had to choose.

I took a step back and looked at the wall again. It took me quite some time to realize some pictures were missing. As I approached and looked at the others, I noticed it was the pictures of David and me, on holidays. Why take them off? And who did that anyway?

A bit confused, I picked up the pancake plate and walked through the door, straight into my man cave. I

placed the food on my desk and looked at my bulletin board hanging right above it, with my planning and tasks. Never have I been so lucky to have put down a plate, it would have shattered into a gazillion pieces. Staring back at me are two ocean blue, shining eyes, a pair of chocolate brown ones right next to it, they are both smiling. In the background, David and I are playing ping pong. Who put these in my room?

~Megan...

It is the first of November. Everyone is visiting and mourning a death. People are so stupid. You do not simply pick a date and say, 'this is the

one day on which we will all think about the ones that left us, but attention: after midnight, we quit.'

Not a day has gone by -I think it is even safe to say that not a single hour has-, that I have not thought of you. Regret is getting worse as the days go by, and I need you to give me a sign. Let me know you are okay.

Did I tell you about the pictures the other day? Weird things happen when you are living your life without even noticing you are. It is like I have been sleepwalking ever since you left me. Some people tell me to get my shit together because I have experienced

from up close how fast life can pass you by, end so suddenly. I am afraid you were the one of us that knew how to handle life. All I do is a struggle, hate, sleep, eat, struggle some more.

Like I said, November. No school today, and it is your favorite time of the year. You know I hate Christmas, but you have no idea what I would give up for this one to be with you in it. I might even buy myself one of those horrendous themed up sweaters you used to wear.

I paused my thought about Sam, they had come to hurt so bad, I could not take them anymore. If I had

been a girl, I would have written it all down in diaries, wait for her to come back and read them. Boys do not write, they are tough. They stay strong, at least in public. That is what my dad always told me. He had always been somehow disappointed that I was not and would never be able to become the strong son he wanted so badly. Boys play football, I play chess. Boys game, I read. Boys have girlfriends and friends, I used to have a cat, but he left me.

'Finn?'

In the beginning, I had been relieved to bump into Megan in the mornings. To know that she was back,

dad was feeling better, and she would keep him off my back. But this woman had the energy of a dozen hurricanes, and who the fuck does mornings on weekends?

‘It’s 9 o’clock, I should get to sleep at this time of the day!’

‘Lazy ass down here, you’ve got one minute.’

The thing I liked about her being so young, was that we could have these conversations my dad never got. We would be talking hashtags and selfies while my dad was reading an actual book, yes you heard me, without them in front of it.

I dragged myself down the stairs.

‘You exhaust me.’

‘Good morning to you too, sunshine!’

‘What do you need?’ my voice was heavy with sarcasm and boredom.

‘We’re visiting Sam today.’ She said it the way you tell your five-year old’s you are going to the beach, knowing goddamn well they adore going there.

‘You say it as if it’s a good thing.’

‘It’ll be good for you.’

‘So is time to see how that’s been working out for me.’

She had won the argument. There we were, standing in front of stone at least as cold as Sam became, in November. I had received another call from Mary, right before heading out. Megan had told me to invite her, too. I declined the call. Not talking to me for days, switching schools right after my little sister’s death, and not telling me about it, not cool. She would have to try harder than this to ever hear from me again.

‘Heard anything from David yet?’ father asked as we were both looking down to the stone.

‘Not a word.’

‘I’m sorry for you, Finn.’

‘Don’t be, got enough people pitying me already. For something I did do.’

She shook his head, he hated it when I admitted what everybody was thinking. I had been the main reason she got into that bloody accident. And no one could take that responsibility away.

This day trip was killing me. They had put Sam right next to our mom, someone you would almost forget was not around any longer. She did leave a big hole in our lives, but not the way Sam did. We had been condoled with the thought of ‘at least she had a great life’ but my sister did not deserve this! Neither of them did, really, but the pain was so different.

When my mom died, I used to think ‘if I get over this, then I can handle everything.’ Never have I been so wrong in my life. Right now, I cannot even think about getting over it, no way

thought would even dare to creep up on me.

‘It pains me to see this.’ My dad said as if he just held the terrific book with Finn’s thoughts in his hands and decided to start reading it somewhere in the middle, at random.

‘Of course, it does darling, that’s normal.’

At this specific moment, it did bother me to have a stepmother. This was clearly out of her comfort zone, and if not, it was out of mine.

‘Why don’t you wait in the car, Megan?’

‘Finn, that’s ridiculous, let me be here for my family!’

‘I should’ve been lying there, not my little girl.’ He was completely ignoring everything around him, I had never seen my dad like this, on the edge of the unknown tear-down.

He was right. The spot right next to mom had been reserved when she passed away. We thought de cycle would be completed if dad would end up next to her one day. It was soothing at that time. And then Megan happened.

‘I can’t hear you talking like this.’ She said right when I wished she would have just disappeared.

‘Then don’t listen.’ She had woken up the most bitter feelings inside of me.

‘What, dad?’ I decided to use words instead of his hard-to-see facial expressions. He did have not to make her suspicious, but I had seen and heard enough.

‘Thank you so much for this lovely trip, but I think I’m skipping the pick-nick. You two have a wonderful time, I’ll be in my room.’

With those words, I walked off. Straight home, always looking down at the pavement that had felt her last breaths while I did not even get the last laugh.

Strange things had been happening ever since our death trip.

When I got back home, I found the pictures someone had taken from Sam’s wall and put on mine, but they were on my bed right now. On every single one of them, David’s head had been either torn out or marked with a huge red cross.

I had asked Megan if she had been in my room again, but she denied

it in every language, English because she is not really into learning other ones. My dad would never do something this subtle, he would just hand me a gun and David's address if he had a problem with him.

I know it is a weird thing to say, but somehow, I had hoped that it was a sign from Sam. This is ridiculous, not only because she is deader than dead, but also because she liked David. She would not try to scare me off with these kinds of hints.

Going to school had been weird. Seeing David not seeing me, it was harder now than ever. Partly of

course because I guess if I could have just asked him ‘hey mate, ever felt like someone would think about killing you?’ this research would be a hell of a lot easier.

Part: 18

I got home earlier and earlier every day. Because, (one) I was not sportsmanlike, at all, but somehow the football team had chosen me… to be their real-life box ball, I had to sprint out of class to escape them. (two) The earlier you leave, the easier it is, because of the mess with the bikes and having to wait for the super-popular kids who cannot seem to multitask, talk

while getting their bike, but always want to do one of those things while blocking everyone else.

And (three), dad had found a solution to my bike-problem. He had bought me a pink one, so no one would think about trashing it, as no one would link it to me. Great idea, but it made it necessary for me to get up half an hour earlier so no one saw me arriving, and skip the last ten minutes of class, rushing to get home.

‘It’s not even half past yet, how the hell do you get home so fast?’

‘Aren’t you supposed to be working? Or drinking?’

He did not answer. This usually meant something bad, so I turned around, took a bite of the sandwich I had made in those short minutes since I had slammed the door shut, daily, and tossed my backpack away.

‘I won’t be going to work for another couple of days.’

‘What do you mean?’

That might have sounded stupid. But in this family, you never know. He could be sick, dying, and not telling me because of all that we have been through. He could be fired, too.

‘Apparently, David’s dad thinks I’m a threat to the company.’

David and I had had our issues before, but they had never included my father getting hurt.

‘What are you going to do about it?’ I asked.

‘What can I do? Wait for another job, of course.’

‘Wait? Dad, I don’t think that’s how it works.’

‘Son, one thing you need to know about this family: nothing ever actually works. If it does, people find a way to ruin it. I don’t know why, but

somehow they feel as if we haven't suffered enough losses in this family already.'

I grabbed my coat and was about to leave the house to talk to David when he stopped me.

'Finn, they're not worth it.'

'How about you? You're not losing your job over his puberty, dad.'

'His father is a professional. He'll have his reasons.'

'And I'd very much like to find out which ones.'

He rolled his eyes and sat back down on his sofa. He made sure he was

comfortable and took today's newspaper in both hands, reading to show me this conversation was over and that I was wrong. But just for once, I did not feel as if he was right. I grabbed the doorknob and seconds later, I felt the chilly wind blowing, freezing my ears. Off we go.

I knew the way by heart. Even if I would have looked at the pavement all the time, I would have found it. Here I was. Standing in front of the house that used to feel more like a home to me than ours ever did. Right after mom's death, they had taken me in. While dad was drinking, Sam ran off, to

Mary's, and my dad started insulting me daily. I used to blame the alcohol, but the things he said left me speechless. They were so accurate. So- I ran off, found myself standing at the very same steps I was right now.

Slowly, I made my way up to the door. Once I was standing there, I could simply hear the beating of my heart. It was pounding against my chest, inside my ears, like in those movies at that moment when their dream changes into someone knocking on their door.

I considered ringing the doorbell. I think about turning around

and leaving. That is when I see his mother, staring at me from the other side of the window. The warm side, the side where David knows who you are. She does not look happy to see me but makes her way up to the door anyway. Her voice is warm, as always.

'Finn, long time no see, what brings you here?'

Something must be wrong. I have been standing here for a minute, and she did not invite me in yet. Last year, she would have pushed me inside in this weather.

'I don't know, is your husband home?'

‘Frank? Why would you need him?’

‘Just a quick question.’ I decided to keep her out of this, at least if she still was.

‘Sure, I’ll call him, he’s still at the office. You can wait with David if you’d like, he just got back, you know the way.’

‘Yes… Sure, thanks.’

I did not move. I was afraid to breathe in too much of his air because he made it damn clear he did not want to share it with me anymore. I was not sure why, though. There had been quite

some rumors about us. Since we are the absolute zeros of the school, at least I am. The longest relationship I have had was one of three days. The poor girl wanted to break up with me on the very first day, but somehow forgot to mention that, and had to wait the entire weekend. I must have been a horrible boyfriend.

Anyways, because- I could not get any girls, people started making up these stories about me having a crush on David. It made things weird at first, but once he figured it was total bullshit, he just stopped paying attention to them. To be honest, I did not mind. I

have had worse than verbal bullying, and in their stories, at least I had an actual love life.

David came downstairs.

‘Mom, who was that at the do-?’

‘Hi.’

‘Finn.’

Part: 19

‘I’d make an ‘at last we meet’-reference. But you no longer seem to be into me or my humor.’

‘Been busy.’

‘Busy enough to ignore her death? Woah, I thought they would never be able to brainwash you too, but they managed. If you will excuse me,

I have to go congratulate Chad now.’

Chad was the most popular footballer in our entire school. He could get everyone to do everything he asked for. David had always been looking up to this guy, because of the number of girls surrounding him.

‘Finn, he just left the office, he’ll be back any minute now. Ah, I see you found David, good. Would you guys like something to drink?’

', Finn was about to leave, weren't you?'

David looked at me as if I would think he was scary, threatening me in my second home... cute.

'You know what, I would much enjoy something to drink if you don't mind.'

I said that to his mother, all of us knew David did mind. He fakes smiled at me, and I smiled back, the first smile I meant, in some months' time now.

I sat with them and my hot chocolate until David's dad got home.

He looked exhausted. When he saw me, he smiled?

‘Great to see you, child, been quite a while, how have you been holding up. Did David give you our card?’

I said it was my pleasure, that he was right, that I had been holding on simply fine -lie- and then I had to admit he did not. He looked at his son, surprised.

‘What, David? Why not, look Finn, we gave him our card with condolences because we could not make it to the funeral, but David did.’

‘You were there?’ I asked David. Not his father, or his mom, I even forgot about our tug of war, or whatever this was. I did not see him and judged him for it, but I just did not see him.

‘I wasn’t.’

‘WHAT?’ both parents said at the same time. Like in the movies, parents just go together with the way vanilla ice cream and chocolate sauce do.

‘I didn’t feel like being there, all those people who don’t care, crying. And those who do-’

He looked at me.

‘I kind of needed you to be there.’ I said. With those words, I got up, explained that my dad was waiting for me and that I had to go, but thank you for the hot chocolate, it was great seeing you all again. I shook hands with his father, and his mother kissed me on my cheek and asked me to visit more often. I said I might. Then I faced David, he was holding out his hand. All I did was say his name, and leave.

I ran off quickly, felt like I did not belong here anymore. Every second in this house was one too much. However, I could not have missed the

red cross on the floor of the hallway, even if I would be running like a freak because David was following me with a knife. It was the same red as in the pictures, but when I came in, I had not seen it?

Outside the wind was tearing through the trees, buffeting against our cabin. The storm was building, so dark that you could not see much past the front porch. Yet I strained my eyes, searching for the source of the sounds assailing my ears. Loud cackling laughter and screams pierced the night, raising chills on my skin.

‘Arielle? Get away from the door’ my mother’s panicked voice called out to me. I have pulled away, back inside the cabin as she locked and bolted the door. My father was rummaging around in some drawers, looking for something.

‘What’s going on?’ I asked weakly. The voices were so loud now. As usual, my parents seemed unable to hear them.

‘We’re leaving’ she said. Her voice was strained. None of us wanted to go, the cabin was home. One we had had for a while. It was supposed to be safe. I fell to the floor, covering my ears

with my hands; the noise was unbearable. ‘mommy’ i whispered. She ran to me immediately, hearing my small plea. I felt the cool press of her fingertips to my temples as the pain receded. The noise was now just a low hum, fading into background noise. I knew from past experiences this would not last long but at least it gave us a little time.

‘Sweetie, you remember that room? The special one?’ she asked me. I nodded. There was a room hidden behind the stove, small enough for one person. A child likes me.

‘I need you to go in there. We’re going to play a game’ she said shakily.

‘Meria! We need to hurry. It’s close’ my dad called my mom. He came over and swooped me up in his arms. ‘I love you baby’ he whispered to me. His eyes were closed tightly, his chin resting on my head.

‘I know’ I heard her reply. She sounded close to tears. ‘I’m not ready, Dorian. She’s just a child!’ she wailed.

‘I know. We have no choice. There is no other option anymore’ he turned to face my mother. I was right, she had tears streaming down her face.

She pressed a kiss firmly to my forehead and looked me in the eyes.

Her silver ones were wide with fright.

‘Okay, sweetie, you remember that game we used to play when you were really little?’ She spoke softly. I nodded in response, too worried to speak.

‘Well, we’re going to play that game now. I need you to be as quiet as you can be. After a while, we will-’ at this point, she burst into tears.

‘we’ll come to get you out’ my father finished. I had never seen them

this scared. We had had a few close calls over the years but nothing like this. They both hugged me one last time before I was placed in the room behind the stove. Their faces were the last thing I saw before I was shut-in. I was not scared of this room, it was safe. I had played in here a lot when the weather was too wild outside or when the noise of the thunder used to scare me. Muffled voices filtered through the gap in the opening. It was so small you could only see fragments of light. I pressed my ear to it, already afraid for my parents. I was safe in my room, but they were not here.

‘…She’s strong Meira… ‘my father.

‘…I don’t want to leave her…!’ My mother’s panicked voice. It was hard to discern but they sounded like they were arguing.

‘…It’s time. Close it or we… for nothing… said goodbye… ‘he was moving away from my hole. The last thing I heard was my mother’s sweet voice whisper to me. ‘We love you. Never forget that. Stay safe, for us baby… stay safe.’

Then my world became dark as they closed the barrier between my room and theirs.

I had no idea how long had passed. It could have been minutes or hours. It felt like forever. I knew no sound, nor sight. All I could do was wait. Then eventually, someone came. At first, all I could see was a slight flicker of light as the barrier opened. Then muted voices and footsteps.

What sounded like scraping as the door to my room was forced open.

Then I looked up and into the eyes of a woman I had never seen before.

‘Arielle? Are you okay? Are you hurt?’ Her voice was worried. I shook my head, no.

‘Where's mommy?’ I asked quietly. They had told me they would be the ones to get me.

‘Oh sweetheart,’ her features were strained as she watched me.

‘They’re dead’

‘No’ i protested. I had seen them. They told me they were coming to get me. The strange woman reached for me. I was too weak to put up much of a fight. As she carried me outside, all I could remember between my room and the car, was red. Blood. Their blood. Shadowy shapes hovered here and there, taking pictures, and talking quietly but when they saw me, all was

silent. The woman held me so that I could not see what was happening but I heard the one-person whisper, ‘What will happen to the child now?’

They were gone. One last ‘no’ escaped my lips before I faded into unconsciousness.

I woke up screaming. My heart beating wildly in my chest and sweat plastering my hair to my face. It was that dream again. The same one I always had. Their faces burned in my memory. Parent’s I knew but would never see again. It had been 12 years; 12 years of torturing myself with that memory, repeatedly until I could not

think, could not feel. The numbness was what I craved, what I needed. I knew if I closed my eyes again, I would see them, still in the aftershock of my dream, so I rolled over in bed, checking the time. 3:14 a.m. I sighed; it could be worse.

There would be no more sleep tonight so I got up. Time to go…

I glanced around the room. It had been my home for the last 2 weeks, the longest I dared stay. Any longer and I would risk being discovered.

I flicked on the lamp beside my bed and stretched out my sore muscles.

I had spent too long training yesterday and my body was feeling it now. Just as my mind was weary from lack of sleep.

'Toughen up. princess' I told myself. That had been my mantra for as long as I could remember. It did no good to whine and moan about something you could not help. The training was essential. Without it, I would be useless if it came to a fight. I made my way to the bathroom in the small motel room. It was a run-down joint. One that would not press for I.D or any other identification that I could

not give. A fake name and a wad of cash around here goes a long way.

The room was sparse, the harsh light from the fluorescent lamp lighting the bare walls. Illuminating the ugly faded green coverlet on the bed to the dirty, stained floor. My one backpack sat on the floor beside the bed, within easy reaching distance. The bathroom was as bare as the room; and just as disgusting. Moldy tiles and I did not even want to know what was in the wastebasket. I turned on the shower and let the hot water ease the tension in my back and neck. Let the water

clean away the sweat clinging to my skin.

I stepped out and caught a view of myself in the mirror. I did not bother with cosmetics, I never had time nor reason to wear any. I was average anyway. While combing out my long hair, my mind wandered to where I could go next. There was one place I never wanted to go to. I avoided that area like the plague. Not only would scouts be running the perimeter of the cabin, the pain of having to relive that nightmare would be unbearable.

The scouts themselves were enough to make my skin crawl. They

were creatures sanctioned with the task of finding me. Monsters made of the stuff people become insomniacs over.

‘Minnesota, it is then’ I said bitterly. I hated ice. I hated the snow. I hated anything cold, unfortunately, it was the only place safe right now. I would head to one of the big cities if I could but at this time of the year, they would be crawling all over the place. Then again, no matter where I went there were bound to be some of them.

They amped up their search efforts around Christmas time. Mainly because they thought I would be stupid

enough to go somewhere familiar but also because all that negative energy humming in the cities, from panic to stress or fear, is what they feed on. New Year's Eve is absolute chaos. If the rest of the human populace could see what I see, they would be driven to insanity.

I headed back into the room to get changed into my traveling gear. I had managed to pick up a few items the day before so I could survive the cold outside. Slipping on a pair of black jeans and a grey long sleeve shirt, I looked out the window and into the night. The motel I was staying at was in

a small town I had never heard of. I was in Europe, in one of the native villages and most of the inhabitants did not even speak English.

Yippee for me. I could not wait to get off this continent.

As I turned away from the window, something moved outside. I just caught it out of the corner of my eye. Ducking out of view of the window, I stole a peek from the very edge. It was there. The shadows surrounding it were what had caught my eye, shadows I knew all too well. It was a hound. One of the more experienced scouts its shadows were undulating in the air

behind it. You could tell how dangerous the creatures were by how dark their Aura's showed. This one had thick black shadows, like smoke. It was strong. It fixed its red eyes on me for a heartbeat before disappearing.

'Shit!' I exclaimed. I bolted away from the window heading for my bag. It was about to get ugly. I had been spotted by one of their scouts, knowing my scent had drawn them to this area. This motel. If I did not get out now, the inhabitants staying here were also in danger, something I could not allow. So- run it was.

Part: 20

I pulled out the bus schedule from my bag and checked the times. Nothing. ‘Nothing?!’ I began to panic. I had not been cornered for a long time; I was too careful. I had let myself linger in one place for too long a now had to deal with the consequences. Shoving the useless paperback into my bag I sprinted out the door and downstairs. At a place like this, they did not bother having someone on guard duty. I pressed the buzzer for attendance a thousand times until someone came out to see what the racket was.

‘I need a car’ I said urgently. He just stared back at me, still half-

asleep. ‘Now!’ I all but yelled. I was not sure if he could understand me so I pulled out what I knew would be understood in any language, and emptied the cash onto the bench in front of him. His eyes widened, taking in the full amount. ‘Car’ I said again, motioning with my hands to prove my point. There was enough there to feed his family for an entire year. He turned around and came back out with a pair of keys in hand.

‘In the shed,’ he said and pointed to the motel. His accent was thick and foreign, Russian maybe? Instead of waiting around to find out, I

grabbed the keys and headed for the door. I quickly did a check of the area and saw nothing but snow-capped trees in every direction. If I focused harder, I knew what I would see. Shadows weaving in and out of the trees, growling, and keening while they waited for orders.

They were growing in numbers and soon, I knew they would launch their attack. I sprinted for the shed now in view. I had just made it to the door when the sky darkened if that were even possible at this point, and the clouds formed shapes. To anyone else,

it would just look like a storm, but I knew better.

They were coming. The hounds' high-pitched yowls and keens pierced the night. I could not wait any longer, another minute and the hunters would show up. The hunters were beings, formerly human, that had gone bad. As bad as you can go.

They had black eyes and fangs that would convince many a human that they were an evil angel. 'If only' I thought. At least a vamp could be staked. I did not have the first clue of how to kill these things, let alone evade them. I had only seen them once before

and that was back from my childhood. We had barely escaped that time.

Their haunting laughter echoed around the valley, chilling me to the bone. I pulled the cover off the only car in the shed, a beat-up old truck. It would not go as fast as I wanted but at least it was sturdy. I had tried escaping the hounds on a motorbike last time and had ended up with claw marks raked down my back. I still had scars.

I slammed the door behind me and started the engine. Or at least I tried to. All that it got me was a short-choked sound before it cut out. I checked the gas and found it had half a

tank. Enough to get me out of here if I could start the damn thing. Trying again, the engine wheezed, unhealthy for a car. ‘come on’ I urged, my efforts coming up useless.

The engine sputtered to life just as the door to the shed flew open. There had to be at least 20 of them. ‘They’re going all out this time’ I thought mentally. ‘Of course, they are’ I argued with myself, ‘They’ve got you.’ ‘Shut up’ I silenced that train of thought. Now was not the time for an internal argument.

I stepped on the gas, aiming to take as many of them out as I could

manage. Too bad they knew how to use their legs and jumped out of the way. I drove like a bat out of hell, speeding, cutting corners, trying to put as much distance as possible between me and the enemy. I could not outrun them but I could lead them in the wrong direction. At least it would give me a chance to escape. Thankfully, it had rained and not frozen over yet on the roads. I had gained about a 5-minute lead on my pursuers so I decided to put my plan into action.

Pulling over I saw a lake up ahead. ‘Perfect,’ I thought.

I stepped out of the car, careful not to leave any tracks lest they are found. I spotted a big long branch and tested its sturdiness. ‘Not bad’ i thought. It could be used as a weapon in an emergency. Heading back to the car I kicked it into gear and drove it straight towards the lake, bailing out the door at the last second. Just a tip, when jumping out of a moving vehicle, always roll on landing. It takes away the sting of the impact. Although on snow like I was, that did not change much. It still hurt like a bitch. I waited until the car sank into the waters, out of sight. Not long after that, the air bubbles stopped surfacing. The entire

process had taken a little less than 3 minutes. If I ever managed to get my pursuers to stop following me, I would have a fair chance in a career as a stunt woman. Not likely to happen though.

I took one last glance around at my surroundings. It paid to be thorough when you were being tracked. I could hear the rumbling of thunder get closer as the clouds above darkened. They would be here any second. I knew from past experiences that they would expect me to be on the road, driving away as fast as possible. In other words, easy pickings. The longer they

chased, the faster they became. I know, unfair right?

I made my way off the road, into a snow embankment off to the side. Laying down, leaving no trace or sign that I had even stopped the car, it would appear as though the car had kept going. The only issue was my scent. They could be able to smell it only slightly. I change clothes a lot to avoid this very thing from happening. I could not do much for it at this point, except stay out of sight and pray to whatever powers were out there that I would not be found.

I focus on slowing my breathing. The chill of the snow was seeping into my clothes, making me cold. ‘Hang on’ I told myself. It would be over soon. One way or another.

The darkening cloud made its way overhead, flashes of light illuminating its depths. Showing outlines of creatures, I wished I could not see. My world turned pitch black as the cloud obscured the waning moonlight. It would be dawn soon, most of the hunting party would have to return to their realm. The one thing they could not stand was sunlight. Some of the more powerful beings and

solitaries were able to move about in the daylight, but as the creatures were born of darkness, that would always be their sanctuary.

The scouts were able to survive in the sun as they were originally the offspring of dark hounds and regular Rottweilers from the human realm. As the years progressed, this line evolved into the scouts that plagued my existence today. They were faster, smarter, and more ruthless in their hunt than ever. You see, there are 3 planes of existence. At least, not including those after death. I have no willingness to discover those, the ghost

of my past haunted me in memory already. No need to add to that.

The first plane is the dwellers of the light. I did not know much about them as they hardly ever interfere in the lives of humans. They avoided the depravity of this world, content to just go on existing in the paradise they created some millennia ago. It exists somewhere between the human realms of sky and earth. Where the two meets on the horizon. However, I had no idea how to transcend the barrier between their world and ours, if only I could. To laze away my days, free from worry or

pain. No wonder they never leave their realm.

The third plane, that of the Underworlds, or dwellers of the dark, is my biggest problem. This human world is the fuel that feeds them, the wood to their pyre if you will. Underworlds need humans to survive. As I mentioned earlier, they feed off emotion. So, stirring up as much trouble as possible is their goal. The earth is their playground.

Then you get us poor souls stuck in between. Earth is the even ground, a place where the two can connect. Beings from the first plane

cannot exist within the third plane and vice versa. So, we are screwed. At least, from what I have been told, the beings from the first plane are not evil. The myth is that they are where the idea of angels and fairies came from. I highly doubt they would terrorize humans like the Underworld's, but then again, you never know.

So-o, this all leads to my current situation in the snowbank. What I would not give to know anything about their world. Ignorance is bliss.

A streak of lightning arced overhead. In that brief flash, I saw them. The scouts had arrived and

passed my hiding place, moving with their inhuman speed, following the road. Not until they were out of sight did, I dare to take another peek at the road behind me. Bad idea. As I did another scout came into view. It had not seen me and I was confident it could not but the panic still rose in me like always. It never went away in their presence.

The scout stopped dead in its tracks and I noticed, that it was different from the others. This hound was slightly larger than the others, the alpha maybe? I was not sure if scouts followed regular canine behavior but I

knew that in most pack animals there was always an alpha. This one was black like the others, still had the same glowing red eyes and sharp, pointed teeth. What was different was its markings, or at least its lack of them. The scouts are black with white markings. When they ran, to me they looked like shadows, smoke curling through the air, but what gave them away was the flashes of white you could pick out when they moved.

This one had none. It was only plain black, and it scared the hell out of me.

And it had stopped.

Part: 21

It sat on its haunches in the middle of the road, as if waiting for something.

Someone…

Then, as if from nowhere, a man appeared, and the sky flashed ominously; the wind dying abruptly and all going quietly.

He was tall, really- tall. He had to be over 6 feet for sure. And my god was he built. Lean muscles barely hidden beneath his black shirt beckoned you closer. I wanted to feel his skin beneath my fingers, to see if

that skin was as smooth as it appeared. Too bad I could not see his face.

I had bet he was gorgeous, beyond gorgeous.

Honestly…?

He looked like sex personified. And I wondered briefly what it would be like to snare him in bed. ‘He’s the enemy’ my more rational side reasoned with me in its internal monologue. ‘Yeah but for a piece of that, getting caught might be worth it’ I retorted.

I dug my fingers into the snow to bring myself back to the present, nothing was worth getting caught. Not

ever. But looking at him, I could almost believe it would be.

He crouched down closer to the hound. If he did not have a long black coat on, I was sure I would see back muscles rippling invitingly. ‘Maybe he’d even have those cute little back dimples’ I wondered silently. ‘Arielle, cut it out’ there it was, my sane side. Having different personalities had always been a problem. Usually, I would have to concentrate to try and follow the one rational voice, but the other side was always there, owing to my more inappropriate thoughts. Thank god it did not voice them aloud.

The man was talking, I could only catch mumbles thanks to my cover, but it looked as though he was addressing the animal. Which proceeded to look around.

The stranger stood back up and faced the lake. I could not check to see what he was looking at in case I moved, and the hound saw me. ‘What if the car’s showing?’ I panicked internally. I pushed those thoughts out of my head instead of letting them run loose, panicking would only make me slip up that much faster. The hound was closer now, sniffing around some bushes near

my cover. The usual chant was pounding in my head, ‘fight or flight.’

If I stayed, I might be found. If I were found in my current spot I would be doomed, no way could I outrun them. There was always the chance they would tire of searching here and move on though. If I ran, they would know it was me in an instant and follow. Tough choice, but I had never been one to sit around and wait while someone decided for me, I never had that luxury.

I did not know if I made the right decision, but then again, second-guessing yourself is what gets people

killed daily. With that thought, I sprang to my feet and sprinted away as fast as I could. I heard the hounds howl and the sound of paws hitting snow as it gave chase. I was thankful there was only one, but I had no idea what the man would do. He was the wild card.

My stamina held, and I fled into the tree line, hoping to lose them in its maze-likeness. The forests in this area of Europe were dense, and the scents of animals were everywhere; hopefully blocking mine out. Then again, mine was fresh…, I concentrated on gauging how far behind my pursuers were and then came to a halt. There was no

sound. No branches snapping under heavy paws, no sharp howl piercing the night. Not anything I was expecting; which made me uneasy. They never gave up, especially not if they were this close. I could not risk heading back to the road in case there was an ambush set up. Then again- I did not want to get lost in a forest, stuck in the middle of nowhere, and staying put would lead them to me eventually. What could I do?

I stood there for what felt like an eternity. Even though it was only a few minutes. They had me stumped. Not only that, they had me caught.

‘Not yet’ I reminded myself. I had been in tough scrapes before and always came out fighting. A plan was forming in my head, hopefully, one that would work. I reasoned that they would expect me to continue through the forest, at which point they would have scouts ready to intercept me. Hell, they had a perimeter set up around the area. I wondered where the others had gone once they figured they were no longer chasing me.

With that logic, heading back the way I had come was also out of the question. They had started to get smarter, catching onto how I thought

and adjusting their hunting strategies accordingly. They would have scouts at the entrance to the forest. The sun would rise soon, and they would have to leave. In other words, they would start to converge on this spot. I began jogging further down the tree line. Everything was pitch black, I knew the sky would be lightening but the heavy foliage stopped any light from filtering through the canopy. I stumbled a few times, less than I would expect for walking through a forest at night but ended up with a few scratches none the less.

At one point I even fell and jarred my knee, sending stinging pain all through my leg. What sucked was I could not even yell from the pain of it.

I was more careful about where I moved from then on, even the slightest bumping of my knee hurt.

I was close enough to the tree line now that I could see the sky was a pale grey. It had been cloudy for weeks but it looked clearer now like the sun might show. ‘Not long’ I thought. Not long and they would have to leave, but they would be getting desperate. I crouched at the end of the trees, biting my lip to stop whimpering. My eyes

were tearing up from the pain in my leg.

Up ahead I could make out the shapes of the hounds. The ones watching the entrance to the tree line. They had made a perimeter like I knew they would. A few were whining and some were snarling, but it was all the same to me. They were the enemy, no matter how animal-like they appeared. They were all monsters.

‘We should have found her by now,’ one of them whined. He was scrawnier than the others. Going with my theory that the scouts were bred from hounds originally, talking was not

out of the question. Although the original hellhounds were never this Empathetic sounding. They were creatures to fear, and far less annoying. I would not underestimate the scouts though; one-on-one they were a bump in the road of my day. But they could signal others, some psychic Telepathy-thing-ie that breached the barriers between our worlds and summoned the others here. As a pack, they were the full-on nightmare. Their power grew in numbers.

Looking at this one though, I would say he was young. New to the

hunting scene. I wish I had just had him to deal with from the beginning.

Too bad my luck ran out 12 years ago.

I looked further down the line, they were spread out at about 16.4’ intervals and continued further than I could see in both directions. My only hope was the sun. The sky was a lighter color now, between blue and grey, soon, I hoped I would see the gold leak in. Unfortunately, before that happened, a hand wrapped around my arm, hoisting me up. The pain in my leg flared and I cried out in pain. Another hand clamped over my mouth, silencing

me. The scouts were headed in this direction, investigating the noise.

‘Well, well, well. What have we here?’ A voice spoke softly in my ear. ‘It appears I have found a stray,’ he joked mockingly. The scouts reached us then and bent their heads in respect. I had had my doubts as to who had been able to creep up on me, but not anymore. ‘Just in time too,’ the voice spoke.

The last thing I saw was the sun break silently over the mountain, spilling golden light into the valley… just as I faded into the darkness.

Part: 22

I was floating on a tide of blissful unawareness. It was dark, but for once, I was not scared. Just peaceful. I could feel a cool breeze kiss my skin and continue its way. I could see colors flashing behind my eyelids, dancing, and spinning into shapes and words I did not understand. I wondered vaguely if this is what dying felt like. If this was death, then I did not mind. It seemed a lot easier than life. Life was difficult. Life was a bitch on the best of days. I wanted to stay here, just to float here for eternity. Was that so wrong? I was tired of running. Here there was no need. No worries. No sadness. Just peace. But like I said, life's a bitch.

This time, I did not want to open my eyes. I had no idea of where I was, and I knew there would be no escaping. I was lying down on something soft, a bed maybe? But that seemed wrong. I had been captured, more likely to have been thrown in a cell somewhere dark and unpleasant, but that is not what it felt like now. The sheets were silk, smooth against my cool skin. Suddenly I was freezing. The breeze returned, but this breeze was cold, frigid, and icy. Adding to my discomfort. If that was even possible at this point.

‘You can open your eyes you know, you’re safe here.’

I knew that voice. That was the same one from the forest, the whole reason I was here instead of on the road once more. The Stranger.

‘Will it make a difference if I see your face before you kill me? I do not think so. And as for safety, you are full of it’ I retorted, still with my eyes shut. A bad attitude and problems with stubbornness are the result of living on your own for too long. As would happen to every other teenager in my place.

‘You seriously have issues, don’t you?’ he replied. I liked the sound

of his voice admittedly. It was sexy, rolling over your skin, leaving you wanting to hear more. Pitched perfectly between low and smooth. He sounded serious, but also like he was joking. Making fun of me. That pissed me off. Here I was about to die and he is making jokes.

'You know,' I said, sitting up and finally opening my eyes to glare at him, 'You know nothing about me. So, do not sit there and judge me, because quite frankly, I don't give a goddamn as to what you think!' I was finally seeing his face… a bad idea. Mainly because I had been right, he was gorgeous. Like,

stop in the middle of a busy road and stare gorgeous, but also because he was grinning. Like getting me to open my eyes had been a game, one he had just won.

He was staring at my face, my eyes. If I had been uncomfortable before; it was nothing compared to now. So, I did what I always do - I got snarky.

‘What is your problem? Am I so fascinatingly ugly that you can’t stop looking at my face?’

‘Quite the opposite actually’ he replied. I had expected an equally sarcastic answer or even a rude

comment, but that threw me off. So much that my mouth hung open before I remembered how to operate the lower half of my face.

'Uh, thanks… good to know,' I said. It was my usual answer whenever someone said something to me that made me uncomfortable. He was sitting on the edge of, yes, I was right - the bed, wearing a loose black shirt with the sleeves pushed up, and long black jeans. Although I would say they were only long since so were his legs. And so once again I found myself drooling over the enemy. It was hard not to,

I did not get much face time with guys my age. Or anyone really, and I had never seen anyone this attractive. He would have destroyed the hotness statistics in Hollywood.

I had had a friend once when I was in Australia. She had been my age and went to school like every other kid. I had been around 14 at the time so ‘apparently’ (not that I would know considering I did not spend time together with people my age) meeting new people was the cool thing to do. She approached me while I was looking at some new clothes. ‘I like that one. It would look great on you,’ was all she’d

said. She smiled, and I thanked her. For the rest of that day, we spent time together, her giving me tips on what would suit me best and me asking her questions about her life. She always complained that her life was boring but to me, it was perfect. She had family, friends, and went to school. Everything I had never had.

One day the scouts managed to track me through her. She had borrowed my jumper and so, carried my scent with her. Not that she knew. I barely escaped that encounter and knew from then on, that having friends

was too risky. Any sort of continuity was dangerous.

The stranger must have seen the sadness written on my face but there was no way he would know what it was about.

Rather than say anything he smiled apologetically. Like he cared.

‘What are you doing?’ I asked bluntly.

‘What do you mean?’ he looked baffled.

‘Why are we sitting here exchanging formalities when we both know you’re just going to kill me

anyway. What, do you like to play with your prey before ending its life? Didn't your mother ever teach you manners?' I bit out angrily. He still looked confused.

'You make me sound like a serial killer. I'm not going to kill you if that's what you mean.'

'Then why am I HERE?' I raged. 'Why have you been chasing me my whole life? I do not get to be normal, I do not get to have family or friends or even go to school, and I was okay with that because the alternative was worse. What am I doing here if not to die? What have I wasted my life trying to avoid?' I was running out of

steam. I had been angry for so long and finally had a chance to get it out. Which was exactly what I needed - to vent.

He waited until I had finished and said only ‘You done whining now?’

Part: 23

‘Idiot-’ That set me off.

‘You- asshole!’

You do not care about anyone but yourself! You stupid, arrogant, chauvinistic-’ my tirade was cut off when he leaned forward and kissed me. I would never kiss- anyone before and had not expected this. This rush of feeling, warmth spreading throughout

my body. His lips were soft but his kiss was anything but gentle. It was demanding and hungry - claiming.

‘Do you ever stop talking?’ he said between kisses. At this point, I did not care. I could not even remember why I was angry in the first place. Slowly, he wrapped my arms around his neck and moved his hands to my waist. I wrapped my fingers in his hair, loving the way it was the perfect length. I gave a little tug which he seemed to like, considering he groaned. I was no longer upright, and his weight pressed me back onto the bed with only clothes separating us. I meant it when I said I

did not care anymore. I was going to die anyway, regardless of what he said earlier. Why shouldn't I get to feel just once, what it is to be wanted? To feel needed for once in my life? I deserved that. So-o, I gave myself over to him completely, without inhibition.

I pulled his shirt off over his head, running my easily his chest; over each muscle, delighting in the way they tensed beneath my hands. As if my touch drove him insane too.

I kissed his skin the way I had first wanted to when I had seen him on the road, smiling when I encountered the little back dimples I had imagined.

He pulled me up by the nape of my neck, grasping not but tenderly now. Kissing me slower, more deeply. His kisses drugging me in their depth. The rest of my clothes fell to the floor, leaving me in just my bra and underwear. I rarely wore nice undergarments, mainly because I never needed to. thankfully, this was one of those times. My favorite pair so far, black, and lacy with a small silver A in the middle (coincidence, I swear.)

He caught it and stared intently, smiling slightly before returning to my mouth. My hair had come free of its ponytail, spilling long

and golden around us. The color somewhere between honey and sunlight. He ran his fingers through the strands and I realized; I was about to have sex with someone whose name I did not even know. I pulled away only slightly so that I could look at him. His silver eyes stared back at me in question.

'My sex rushing out is like a worm wetness from me, yet gripping down, swallowing even of our creampie, more and yet even find the way of galloping more of his loving erection, that just takes him into me, down inside and askes for more.'

‘I don’t know your name,’ I whispered.

‘Taylor’ he replied.

All talk was lost after that. Our mouths were busy. The rest of our clothes fell away until we were skin to skin. ‘At least you’re not cold anymore’ the inner voice in my head said to me. The rational side piped back ‘You’re insane.’ Pushing my thoughts away, I silenced them both.

I did not even hesitate to wonder if what I was doing was right, or sane. I wanted this. He was the last chance I would have to do this, so I did not care about his motives or hidden

agendas. That was assuming he was not just some hot-headed rake out for an enjoyable time. Which sounded about right to me. But the way he was looking at me, did not feel impersonal. It was like he cared. On some level, he knew that is what I needed.

We took things slowly, I let him lead. A concession on my part but then, I had no idea what I was doing. It was not something you needed to think about though, you just -- knew. It hurt for only a second and then was unlike anything you can imagine. Books and movies cannot prepare you for it, they do not even come close. Not really. Sex

is just something else. After, I fell asleep resting my head on his chest while he whispered words I could not understand and draw circles slowly on my back. I felt weak but in an effective way. Not weary like I had been for so long. I was at peace when I let the dreams carry me away from consciousness.

I wish I could like dreaming.

I wish my dreams were the kind you could lose yourself in and wake up with a smile instead of a scream on your lips. I wished for a lot of things I could not have.

The first thing I noticed when I woke up was that there was no light coming from the window. I thought, ‘Surely I didn’t sleep that little an amount of time? Or was it that long?’ I did not know. What I did know, was that I woke up alone.

I looked around. You think he would be around somewhere after last night. Him. ‘Taylor,’ I tested the name on my lips, smiling silently to myself. Looking around, I could not see any clothes, not even the ones that should have been on the floor, which surprised me.

I stood up, taking the sheet with me, draping the black silk around until it was held in place by my hand clutching the fabric to me.

Picking up the skirts of my makeshift dress with my free hand, I moved towards the balcony. The curtains, like everything else, were black. They were made of a gauzy material and moved in the slight breeze like a shroud, wafting around and grazing my skin. My hair blew around my shoulders, following the direction of the wind and framing my face. The balcony itself was beautiful, in a dark and twisted sort of way. As expected, it

was black and made of some sort of rock. The whole thing seemed carved out of marble and polished until you could see yourself in it. I looked down at the theme reflected in its depths, more than a little daunted by the sheer size and opulence of this place. It seemed more like a palace than a prison.

Closer to the banister, something sparkly caught my eye. I had always loved sparkly things, my mother used to call me a magpie. God, I missed them.

Moving towards the object, I crouched down to stare at it. It looked

so fragile, as though one touch could cause it to shatter into a tiny thousand pieces, this little shard of light in all the darkness. It was the moon. A tiny pendant in the shape of a crescent moon so round, the ends almost touched to form a circle, but not quite. Picking it up carefully with the fingertips of one hand, I wondered what it was made of. Glass? Diamond maybe? If it were a diamond, it would be worth a fortune. It was not overly large, but the artisanship was incredible, the size of the bottle cap.

'It's yours if you'd like,' he said. I glance back into the room, still

in my crouched position and bent over the little gem, to see him stride slowly out onto the balcony. I was surprised I could see at all with how dark it was.

‘There is no light here, but I thought you’d like something to remind you of how beautiful the night can be,’ he spoke softly. As if afraid to ruin the moment. I could barely look him in the eye, remembering anew the events of the last night, and going more than a little shy. I kept the emotion out of my voice when I replied, ‘Will I was not seeing it again then?’ To which he did not reply. I sighed, ‘I love it. How am I supposed to wear it?’ If I was going out,

then I was going out true to my style. Why not have something beautiful to go with me?

He continued his slow pace to where I was crouched on the ground and I stood cautiously. I held the little moon up to him as an offering, feeling self-conscious in the knowledge that all I was wrapped in was a silk bedsheet. He took the moon from my hands, leaving me to feel slightly deprived of its beauty, and motioned for me to turn around. I did as he said and looked down as he fastened it around my neck on a little silver chain that came from who knows where. He had had it with

him the whole time. He let my hair fall back in place, sliding his fingers through the strands.

I pressed my hand to the necklace lightly, ‘It’s beautiful. Sure, you’re not wasting it on someone like me?’ I said quietly.

‘Turn around and let me see’ he replied. I did as he said and looked up into his silver gaze. ‘Exquisite,’ he breathed as he lowered his eyelids and bent his head to mine so that only our lips touched. I parted mine softly, in acceptance. I wanted as many of these moments as possible before I died, never mind that he was the cause.

He took my face in his hands and kissed me slowly. As if savoring it as much as I…?

My skin was cool in the night, but I felt myself getting warmer. His body was pressed against mine, holding me close against the breeze. A shiver run down my spine, the good kind, as he kissed the bare skin of my shoulder.

‘You’re cold,’ he said, more of a statement than a question. ‘We’ll have to find you some new clothes’

‘Mmmm, that sounds nice, but maybe later,’ I said, leaning into him. I had no idea where my confidence came from. I did not use to be so forward, but

then again, I had never felt so comfortable with someone. Death is a good incentive to let go of your fears.

He chuckled. ‘After that marathon last night, you’re still not satisfied?’ I shook my head no and moved past him towards the bed. I glanced over my shoulder at him, silhouetted on the balcony he looked like something from another world. All tall, dark, and dangerous. Every inch of him was divine and I needed the contact of his skin on mine to feel alive. It was like nothing else existed but the two of us at that moment. I sat on the bed still holding the sheet. I did not

have quite enough confidence to drop it just yet. He looked a little in pain as he sauntered over to me.

'What is it?' I asked worriedly. I had creeped him out with my pushiness.

'I can't right now,' he said. 'No! - No, I want to, believe me, you have no idea,' he started at the surprised look on my face. I had felt slightly rejected; it was not a nice feeling. 'I just have some things to do.

I was going to ask if you'd like to come with me, but I wasn't sure if you were okay after... well, you know,' he looked a little sheepish. You think it

would make him look less attractive but all it did was add a slightly boyish appearance to him. I was still preening over how he said he had come to see if I was okay.

He cared, although why he should be a mystery to me. It was not making sense to me. Was I going to die or not? There was not a point in making sure someone is okay if you were just going to kill them. Which begged the question, what did he want with me? If he thought, he was getting a sex slave he was dead wrong. Although the idea had possibilities... 'Arielle no! That is so-oo degrading,' my rational side

piped up. I had come to call her Jane. She was the goody-goody in me so why not give her a similar name?

'Yeah, but it'd be worth the hit to your ego,' my worse side reiterated. We will call her Carmen, shall we? Jane and Carmen continued their internal banter while I struggled to figure out what I was going to do. Honesty had always been my best and worst attribute. Some people did not like to be told the truth and I could be blunt at times.

It may or may not have gotten me into trouble a few times in the past.

‘Taylor, are you going to kill me or what?’ I asked when in doubt, go with your gut feeling, and my gut was telling me to get it over with.

‘Didn’t we go over this already? No, I’m not,’ he responded. My brows knit together in confusion. What was I supposed to do then?

‘Why did you follow me then?’ I had to know.

‘Well, that’s what I needed to talk to you about. You are not going to like it but you will find out soon enough, I guess. Just trust me when Sha-har returns you’ll know everything.’

‘Who’s Sha-har?’ I asked, curious as to this new female entering the picture, who somehow knew what was going on with me even though I did not. It did not seem fair.

‘Don’t look so annoyed, she’s an incredibly wise, old, woman who I’ve known since childhood. She is respected by all, and that means you too,’ he said meaningfully. I could tell he meant I should behave in front of her.

‘I’m not an animal, I can control myself. So, what do we do for now then?’ I asked him. He seemed to think for a minute, staring at the floor.

‘Of course,’ he said aloud. ‘She can help,’ he was speaking to himself.

‘Uh, Taylor? Who can? What are you talking about?’ I was completely baffled.

‘Well, we do need to leave this room at some point, and unless you want to just wear that,’ he said, motioning at my sheet. I shook my head no. ‘Well, you will need clothes. I am no good at this thing, however, I know someone who is. She used to be my little sister’s companion, but my sister is known for being a tad unruly. To put it simply, my sister was an absolute

little terror and Saber had had enough,' he explained.

'Uh, Saber?' she sounded scary. Who named their kid Saber?

'It's a nickname. Her name is Sabine,' he said with a laugh. 'I'm going to go grab her, do you need anything? There's a bathroom through there with a shower or bath and toiletries if you need them,' he said. I followed to where he was looking and saw the shiny black door. I was getting used to expecting nothing else at this point. 'I'll be back soon,' he said, bending down and pressing a light kiss to my lips. I sighed into his embrace

but held myself in check. I did want to clean myself up a little, no doubt I looked horrible at this point.

‘Mmm,’ he breathed into my hair, ‘very soon,’ he got up and left. I laughed quietly to myself. This would not be so bad. I was not running for my life anymore, so far it was a subtle change of pace.

Part: 24

I stood up and headed into what I hoped was a bathroom. What I found was an entire bathing suit. Off to my left was another door I imagined was the closet but other than that, the ‘bathroom’ was huge. It was more like a

completely new annex. Unlike the other room, the ceiling was not several feet above my head. The bedroom was more like a chamber, with a ridiculously high roof. I had missed it last night but the room was lit by sconces on the walls, they burned a warm glow rather than a harsh light. It was relaxing.

Reminding me of tiny fires. The bathroom was also lit by the fire sconces, and they illuminated everything. From the long-mirrored wall to the enormous bathtub in the middle of the room. The swimming pool was more accurate. What was it with these people and having everything

huge? Well, I suppose if you have the money, why not?

The bath, of course, was black marble, and I could see myself in its reflection. I ran my fingers lightly across the surface, it was so smooth. I made sure there was no one around, not that there would have been but I had gotten so used to having to check, and dropped the sheet to the tiled floor after turning on the taps in the bath. It filled up very quickly, bubbles and all even though I had not put them in. Talk about heaven. I washed my hair and delighted in the way the water slid over my skin, the perfect temperature. I did

not want to ever get out, however, Taylor had said he would be back.

‘Taylor… sexy-much?’ I heard Carmen say. ‘I’ll agree on that one, even for someone who you’ve known for what, a day?’ even Jane agreed. That was a first, to my knowledge I had not heard them agree in the 12 years they had been with me. Do not ask me what they were, I had no idea. I could just remember them always being there in the back of my mind when I thought about anything. I was sure they were part of my subconscious, which could make me insane. Well, everyone has

their issues, mine just happens to have their personalities.

I had never responded to them before, more convinced than anything that they were figments of my imagination, but then again, with some of the things I had seen, you never knew.

‘Can you hear me?’ I asked internally. If someone walked in, they would think I was talking to myself so I did not say it aloud.

‘What do you think Princess? We’re in YOUR head, so, I’m thinking yes,’ Carmen retorted.

‘Carmen! Do not be so rude. Yes, Arielle, we can hear you, loud and clear my dear,’ Jane responded.

‘Then why haven’t you tried to talk to me before now?’

‘Because you would have freaked out and had a spaz attack. No way does any of us want to end up in a mental home,’ that was Carmen.

‘We thought it best to let you come around on your own,’ Jane.

‘So, every time I heard you and told you to shut up, you were listening? Man, this is so weird,’ I told them.

‘Not everything is about your sunshine, this is weird for us too.’

‘Yeah, but this is her head Carmen, she has a right to be worried. I do not think it is anything to stress over. We’ve been here for a while as you well know.’

Yes, 12 years to be exact. Ever since the morning after my parents died. This was just my way of dealing with it, well it was out there.

‘Can we pick this up later?’ I asked them. I was so not in the mood to deal with this now. On top of everything, learning that I was insane was not on my to-do list.

‘Sure,’ they both replied in unison.

Part: 25

I got out of the bath, all clean and relaxed. I wiped a section of the mirror to see myself through the steam. A black bath towel was wrapped around me with my hair hanging long and wet down my back. Looking at myself, I thought I might look different after last night. But there was not anything. I was still the same, still just me. My blue eyes stared back at me. I suppose I was lucky. Even for all my years of training and running, I did not have that many scars, excepting the

ones down the middle of my back in the shape of ragged claws.

That had been a bad week. Recovery was as painful as the wounds themselves had been. I wondered if Taylor had seen them last night. He must have, they were not obvious now, but up close you could still see the silvery lines outlined on my tan skin. Sighing, I stepped away and dried off. I managed to find a toothbrush and hairbrush to groom myself a little. I still needed clothing. Taking a final derisory glance at my reflection, I decided I was as cleaned up as I was going to get

decided to head for the door. I would have to face the world eventually.

As I approached the door, someone began banging loudly on the other side.

‘Hurry up in there human, I don’t have all day,’ they yelled. It was female but the sound was distorted through the wood.

‘Saber, I told you to be nice, not to scare her,’ a voice I recognized as Taylor’s replied to her loud yelling.

‘Being scared can be good for you occasionally,’ she replied. ‘Besides, not as if I care whether or not she likes

me. I’m not here to jump to her tune you know.’

‘No, but you will jump to mine and I said be nice.’

I decided I would intervene before it got ugly. Opening the door, I met the girl head-on. ‘Am I interrupting?’ I asked with a grin.

She looked me over from head to toe, pursing her mouth at the towel wrapped around me, in what looked like disapproval. Where Taylor was all dark and handsome, this one was all light and refined. She had platinum blonde locks that fell straight to her just past her shoulders and dark

emerald green eyes framed by thick lashes.

Her make-up was precise and perfect, not too heavy and complimenting her pale skin perfectly. When he had said her name was Saber, I was expecting tall and intimidating. With scars and even piercings, not someone who looked like they spent their weekends at country clubs. She did not look like she could fend off hello kitty let alone a real threat, and she lived in the underworld?

Maybe…?

Things were not as bad as I thought they were. Then again, these

people are the reason my parents were dead. It would be stupid of me to underestimate her. She walked around me in a circle and I felt a moment of insecurity. Finishing her inspection, she moved back in front of me and offered her hand to me. ‘Saber,’ she introduced herself.

‘Arielle,’ my response sounded wary. And I thought she was not intimidating? For a small person, she was intense. She looked you dead in the eye when she spoke.

‘Okay, well I can work with this. Taylor, do your thing and come back later when I’m finished with her,’

she turned to him and directed towards the door. I shot a confused look at Taylor; he shrugged his shoulders apologetically before turning around and wandering off to god knows where. ‘Finished doing what with me?’ I asked. I was a tad worried.

‘Getting you cleaned up and dressed properly. You do not seem fit for a prince now. The raw material is there, you just need polishing up.’ She said aloud, walking around me again. She picked up a strand of my hair, felt the texture, and then let it fall again. I moved away from her scrutiny.

‘What do you mean ‘fit for a prince’?

‘Well, what did you think he was? Do you think any old person gets to live in the palace? No, you must be royalty or a close friend. Or servant but you hardly ever see them around,’ she said pulling out what looked like a mini handheld. She began tapping away and pressing buttons. I could not see so I had no idea what she was doing.

‘Care to fill me in on this whole situation?’ I hated not knowing things. And it was about time someone told me what was going on here.

She sighed dramatically before launching into her explanation.

‘Try to keep up with me, and walk as we talk,’ she said, ushering me towards the door of the bedroom.

We entered the hall when she began railing away and it took all my concentration to focus on what she was saying, I did not notice where we were going or even who passed us, even though I know a few were brought up short when they saw me in a bath towel.

‘Okay, so this is how it works. You are in the realm of Aiǫ́nia Nýchta, which translated means ‘eternal night.’

In case you have not noticed, which I would say you have not, there are no suns nor stars or even moons here.

That is because the creatures of this realm do not require them. I think they'd liven the place up a little, but then again that would be a moot point.' We turned a corner and I saw something black slide down an adjacent hallway. 'You don't want to know what that is so don't ask,' she said bluntly. Saber kept up a good pace as we talked, I was a half head taller than her and was straining to keep up while she continued talking. 'Taylor is the prince of this realm and her mother, the

queen, is anxious to meet you. Why I have no idea. Regardless, you cannot very well meet her in that,' she said, shooting another disapproving glance at my towel. 'It's my job to at least make you presentable. I'm doing this out of courtesy to her, I owe you nothing.'

'I don't expect you to. I didn't ask you to do this you know,' I reiterated. The last thing I wanted was anyone to owe me anything. I was not weak, and I could look after myself. But she was right, if I had to meet royalty, I should at least look respectable. It was Taylor's mother. Oh, that was so-oo

weird. One day I am running for my life, the next I am meeting underworld royalty. Well, life had certainly become interesting.

Like I said, meaning eternal night. Most people just call it the Underworld. It is home to everything you fear when you go to sleep at night. I do not even like to deal with some of the things that reside here, but home's home, I guess. You'll get used to it... ah! here we are.'

I finally looked up from the floor to be presented with a large glass door. It was mirrored glass so I could not see inside, but scrawled on the

mirror in red was ‘Illyria.’ Saber waited a moment before pushing open the door. She appeared to be readying herself for something. I decided not to ask.

She pushed the door open to reveal the first room I had come across that was not black. It was done in royal tones of red. Red drapes framing large glass windows, thick, plush red carpeting, and red velvet settees and lounges. Seated on one of the settees reading what looked like a romance novel was a woman who appeared in her early 30’s. She looked upon our arrival and squealed in delight at

Saber, who noticeably cringed. Saber squeezed her eyes shut as the woman launched off the couch and ran to her, throwing her arms around Saber's waist and laughing happily. She was all but jumping up and down on the spot.

'Saber honey, I'm so glad you decided to visit me today. Did you hear? I'm engaged!!!' she said, pointing at the rock weighing down her left hand. That thing could take an eye out.

'Yes, I did. I'm so happy for you,' Saber said it sincerely, just without as much enthusiasm. 'And I'd love nothing more than to ask when and how he finally proposed, but we

have more pressing matters.' 'More pressing than my engagement? Oh, who's your friend?' she said, turning to face me.

'I'm Arielle,' I introduced myself, needing to reassert my independence after being handed off from person to person. It got a little degrading after a while.

'She's staying in the west wing,' Taylor added, looking subtly at me before glancing back at the woman. The woman's mouth dropped open something had shocked her.

'No way,' she breathed. 'You finally found her then? Does she know?'

she asked Taylor, ignoring me completely except for a few awed looks.

'No, and we can't be the ones to tell her. It's not our place,' she replied firmly.

'You take all the fun out of this you know,' the woman began to pout.

'I'm standing right here you know,' I pointed out, even though I had known Taylor would not tell me about the big news. I would find out later and blah, blah, blah. This sucked. And I was still in a bath towel to top it off.

What a day this was turning out to be.

‘She is to meet the queen later to discuss the situation. For now, I have been told to get her at least presentable. Can you help?’ she asked.

‘Of course, I can hun, you came to the right place,’ she turned to me then. ‘Hi, sorry about that, I’m not usually so rude. The name’s Illyria, but Lia’s fine,’ she said with a grin. Her laugh lines showed when she talked, but overall, I would say she was an extremely attractive woman. She had curly brown hair, cut short to above her shoulders. I was not sure, but a certain way’s when it caught the light, her hair

looked slightly red. I think the correct term for the color was mahogany.

'Lia was a good friend of my mothers. She is also the royal beautician and is going to help you. Play nice guys,' she said, gliding over to a settee and dropping down to pick up the book Lia had discarded in her excitement; she began reading where Taylor had left off.

Then, the room shifted.

We were no longer in the red room, but what looked like a salon. White walls covered by so many mirrors I could not count were complimented by a bright crystal

chandelier in the ceiling. It rained downlight on everything, reflecting in mirrors and temporarily blinding me. I had to squint while my sight adjusted.

‘Sorry, I forgot to warn you, the initial change of a room is hard on human eyes,’ she said, Imitating me on the shoulder. I wondered what they meant when they kept saying, human. Then again, I was in another realm. She indicated a chair over to the left where a bench in front of a mirror was covered with all sorts of tools for cutting hair and doing nails. There was also an assortment of creams and masks and some vials of liquid I could

not identify. I swear one of them moved.

Yeah, I was scared. As if on cue, an entire group of beings appeared. They were extremely small, barely reaching Taylor's waist, and extraordinarily pretty. They were male and female and all different. Some had left in their hair while some had ice crystals glittering on their eyelashes. The only thing they had in common was their eyes. They were black.

'These are the divine. They are safe, trust me,' Taylor said as she began rubbing some form of liquid into my hair. 'This will go easier with some

music. Kael, would you mind?’ she spoke to one of the da’veen. He had raven black hair that glistened in the light and I am sure I saw feathers near the collar on his back. he nodded once before leaving. After a moment, the most beautiful sound I had ever heard began to play in the room. I looked to see the raven-being playing what looked strangely like a flute only it did not sound like anything I had heard. It was soothing like nothing you would believe. I felt the leather of the chair as I lay back, letting the music calm me. I had to trust these people, what other choice did I have?

I have no idea how long I was in that place for. It felt like it had been hours. Considering there was no sun I could not even tell if it was day or night. All I knew was that they had spent a lot of time on me. I would like to say their time was wasted, but it was not. They were good at what they did.

'So hun, what do you think?' Taylor spun my chair around to face the mirror. It took everything in me not to gasp.

The creature staring back at me looked as if they belonged here, an enchanter. Her skin was flawless, full of life. Her hair, spun gold, hanging to her

waist in elegant spirals. Everything about her was polished to perfection. She would even give Taylor a run for her money. Dark sapphire eyes were rimmed by thick dark lashes, her lips lush and the color of pale roses. I looked down at my hands, even the nails were buffed and polished. I had never had nice nails because I trained too much to bother with painting them - it had always chipped off. I had never bothered with any of these things, it was all new to me. So, I found myself staring back at the beauty in my reflection.

‘Is that me?’ I asked, then realized how stupid I sounded. Of course, it was. I raised a hand, watching my reflection copy the action, lightly grazing the skin of her neck. It was smooth and soft. Her skin - my skin.

‘Of course, it is. You look stunning,’ she said, beaming with pride at her work. ‘I must admit though; you were a bit of a disaster when you came in. It was like you’ve never even had a haircut,’ she said with a visible shudder. I looked at the ground. I knew I was not much to look at.

Not exactly as if I had reason to worry about my appearance, I never went anywhere. I reminded them of a stray dog, rough around the edges and homeless. While my hair was long, it had been unruly and in bad need of a cut. Not to mention my skin had been lacerated by the branches in the forest, my knee was proof of that. At least I thought it was. ‘It hasn’t even bothered me these last few… whatever it’s been since I got here’ I reasoned with myself. I bent forward and lifted the hem of the dress they had put me in when I had arrived. Narrowing my gaze, I lightly touched the skin of my knee, it was completely healed. Not

even a scratch was visible on my skin from any of my cuts. ‘How?’ I asked Taylor, glancing back up to look at her.

‘How what?’ she said distractedly, still fussing with my hair arrangement. She was pulling it up and twisting the length of it, trying assorted styles.

‘I’m going to leave it down, somehow I think you’ll be more comfortable that way.’

She motioned to one of her assistants who held up a pair of diamond earrings. ‘No, the other ones, those are too distracting. She needs something simpler, when will you learn

Niami?' The creature huffed and walked away, returning with a small pair of what looked like tear-shaped sapphires on a bed of diamond shards made to look like a delicate web.

'O-oh perfect!' Taylor crooned, giving her assistant a zealous nod of approval. 'Here,' she said, handing them to me. 'Put them in while I find some matching hair clips, I changed my mind about your hair, we'll leave it down but I'll pull back some of the weight and just fasten it around the back.'

Most of what she had said had not even registered with me, I was too

busy admiring the earrings but more importantly, wondering how to put them in. I had never gotten my ears pierced.

‘Slight problem,’ I said interrupting her. She looked at me quizzically.

‘Yes, dear?’ I pointed to my ear lobes in response.

She stared, confused for a moment until realization spread across her face.

‘Oh, well,’ she pursed her lips thoughtfully, ‘we’ll just have to do something about that. I’m sure you

don’t mind now do you?’ she smiled and straight away one of the creatures, this one was slightly greenish with long strands of seaweed for hair, handed her what looked to me like a gun. I tensed automatically, unsure of what was going on.

‘You okay? You can relax, this will only hurt for a moment. Besides, I am sure you have felt worse before… ‘She readied herself by a table, picking up random objects then putting them down again. She turned around, obviously having found what she was looking for, and held up both the gun and cream in a jar. It had a label but it

was written in some strange language that used a mixture of cursive symbols and images.

‘I take that isn’t a real gun, right?’ I said, I had no idea what was going on, but I was unarmed in any case. I liked Taylor, but someone that erratic was unpredictable.

‘Oh sugar, heavens no! I’m not going to shoot you, dear, it’s my job to make you flawless, why on Earth would I kill you before anyone had even had the chance to see my work?’ she shook her head, laughing at the idea. It made sense. But I still did not miss the fact that she had not said she would not kill

me, just that she would not kill me before someone had seen her work. I needed to be more careful, I did not know these people, any of them. They could all be serial killers, then there was the fact I still did not know what my purpose was in all of this. Hopefully meeting the Queen would clear things up.

‘Okay, so this is what I’m going to use to pierce your ears child. Are you going to be able to sit still for me? It’ll only take a sec,’ she continued talking while wiping my earlobes with what I assumed was disinfectant from the

smell. It almost stung my eyes with its intensity.

Part: 26

‘Yeah whatever, I’ll be fine,’ relieved that it was not an actual weapon, I settled back into my chair, closing my eyes to take my mind off the coming pain. She was right, I had been through much worse. Once, a few years ago, I had been running from a scout through some tiny village in Africa made up of dirt roads and make-shift sheds. Just one scout followed my trail, a newbie who had no idea what he was doing.

However, in my over-confidence, I had neglected to see what was straight ahead. I had been checking over my shoulder when I fell, straight down into a ditch on the side of the road containing the wreckage of some broken-down cart. I had been in a lot of pain, most of which came from my left arm. Right where I had landed on part of the cart with a few nails sticking out. I groaned quietly and forced myself to be quiet altogether, the scout was still around somewhere. After what seemed like an age without any sign of the scout, I had gotten myself out of the ditch to the closest place I could find medical aid. The

scout never found me, but I could still remember afresh the pain of that injury and shuddered involuntarily.

'There we go! All done. You all right sweetheart?' I looked in my reflection, surprised at how smoothly she had pierced my ears. I had barely even felt a twinge of pain.

'Wow, they're so... 'I was at a loss for words.

'Shiny? Beautiful? Suit you perfectly?' she supplied. I laughed,

'Yeah, they great. Thank you, Taylor, for everything.'

‘Oh, that’s quite all right, but we aren’t done yet. Now to find you something to wear!’ She then squealed happily like a girl who had just unwrapped her first Barbie at Christmas, and the room shifted. The beautiful were creatures gone, and we were back in what I was calling the ‘Red-room’ where Taylor was still flicking through the same romance novel.

Taylor glanced up for a moment automatically, then had to look again. This time her emerald eyes went wide with surprise. She let the book fall to the floor as she stood, appraising me

from head to toe, this time without the disapproval of any kind.

‘My God,’ she whispered, ‘how did you do it? She looks… decent.’ I had a feeling Taylor was not the kind of person who liked being outdone. I was not saying I was better than her in any kind of way, just that she did not like the idea that I could have made such a dramatic transformation. I was a little miffed that she had put it down to ‘decent’ though.

‘Decent? Taylor honey she looks hot,’ Taylor said with a suggestive waggle of her perfectly arched eyebrows. Taylor half-smiled, not

saying anything, just continuing to shake her head as she circled me. She came to stand in front of me, ‘Time to get you out of that silly towel. Follow me,’ that she headed straight towards the door after promising Taylor she would stop by for a real chat the moment she had time free.

Taylor waved enthusiastically after Taylor and even gave me a motherly hug and kiss on the cheek before saying, ‘Go, have fun my sugar, and remember,’ suddenly her eyes turned serious and she dropped her smile, ‘whatever happens, not everything is as it seems.’ I looked at

her immediately on guard, completely shocked by this change in her behavior, but as soon as it came, it was gone. Replaced by another peel of laughter and an apology while she ran off to ready herself for the night's events. I stood, frozen, in the middle of the room trying to understand what she had meant. Or if she had said it at all.

'That woman is a certifiable bucket of crazy,' Carmen supplied for me.

'Well, that did seem rather odd… She was so nice though,' Jane reiterated. I pressed two fingers to my

temple and closed my eyes, this chatter was going to drive me crazy.

‘O-ooh drive you crazy? Like it is not bad enough I share a conscious with miss goody-two-shoes over here, but I also must deal with your insecurities as well?’ her tone was snarky, I figured she was just warming up for an argument.

‘Carmen! Enough, without her, we would not even be alive. Not everything is about you, you know. I am sorry Arielle, she is just having a dreadful day… ‘A separate conscious within my mind has its dreadful day… sure, why not.

‘Whatever guys, listen, I don’t know what this is, or even that you were able to communicate with me until now, so just give me some time to figure it all out yes? I have a lot on my plate right now… ‘I- heard Carmen huff but thankfully she stayed quiet. Jane was quiet also- but I could feel more of an apologetic feel emanating from her. Seriously, what was wrong with me that I would put myself in this kind of situation. Hell, I did not even want to think about where that road would lead… crazy central, population me.

‘Arielle! What are you doing? Let us go!’ Taylor called out to me from

outside the door, annoyance stamped across her beautiful features. I rolled my eyes and began following her through twisting hallways, the heavy question playing on my mind of what would happen to me tonight. What did Taylor's words mean? Whatever the case, I would need to be prepared.

Part: 27

I stood in the center of Taylor's closet, relieved to find it was like any other closet I had seen. In all honesty, I had been expecting grand chandelier or her wait-staff. Instead, she rummaged around through rows of clothes obviously with something in mind.

‘Ugh,’ she said with a cry of frustration, ‘I know it’s here, I only just had it made... ‘ I fidgeted with the hemline of my towel, afraid of what she would pull out. I prayed it was not going to be some flouncy, pink monstrosity. Then again, Taylor was not exactly my greatest fan and it seemed like her style of revenge.

‘Finally,’ she said, exhaling with relief. She carefully unzipped the long black garment bag to reveal a floor-length gown straight out of ancient Greece. Its color was of the deepest black, complete with matching black shoes so sharply heeled I was

sure- I could use them as a weapon if needed. The dress was made of the most delicate mixture of chiffon and silk, the type material that seemed to sway even when held still. It reminded me of the shadows that surrounded the hounds. I felt a chill run down my spine at the thought and began feeling anxious. The feeling of entrapping, meant strong in my mind while I tried to fight the urge to flee entirely. I could not do this, it was ridiculous. One moment I am running for my life, the next a ball? No. Something was very wrong here.

Part: 28

So, things have changed enchantingly, not charmingly, I and Damen are in peace for now, to his parents, we turn with a disgraceful bow. But something does not seem right or is it me, they try to get rid of might? I try to pretend it is not true, but all along I should have known, that revenge lives with no mercy on me, and peace is my only hope, my life, and key.

Damen and I are Bound Together, no matter what happens, we have Eternity Forever...

My feet slowly stepped back, towards the exit, of their own accord. My heartbeat picking up in pace. Taylor

was still checking the dress as I turned to run. I reached my hand out, grasping at the air in front of me to get to the door handle until suddenly she was right there - blocking the exit.

‘Where will you run? One step outside the city, the palace even, and you’ll be dead.’ She did not bother with any pretenses, all the walls between us gone. I stared her down easily but something in her gaze almost made me hesitate.

Almost. I struck out, my aim to knock her out of the way so I could escape, but she was far quicker than I realized. In an instant she ducked

around me, moving like the wind, and shoved me against the wall, a thin blade come from who-knows-where pressed against my jugular.

'Taylor, let me go,' I struggled against her, surprised by her impossible strength.

'Enough with this foolishness if I had my way you would already be dead! For whatever reason, you are the key to survival for all of us,' she hissed between clenched teeth. 'If you only knew the things we have sacrificed, the people we have lost-'

'The people you've lost?' I yelled, 'And what about my parents? I

have nothing because of your people,' I spite the word 'people' out, my voice was dripping with anguish and pain at the memory of everything I'd had torn away from me - everything I missed.

'You should not be so quick to judge us. You were a child when that happened, you do not know anything! I knew your parents Serena; I was there that night at the cabin. We are not your enemy - we are the only thing keeping you alive. You've been living in your selfish dreams for far too long, it's time to wake up,' she let me go and I slid to the floor, too stunned by her heated words to think straight. My mind

screamed at me to run away, but my body froze, my expression tore. Was she right? I heard the truth in her voice, she believed in what she had said.

I looked up at her, the disgust she felt towards me evident on her face as she waited for me to say something, anything. Nothing came, only silence.

‘Look, you don’t trust me, and let us face it, I hate you. I have too much invested in you to kill you but by God, if I had the choice… ‘Her eyes conveyed how much she meant those words. ‘You want answers? For everything that has happened? Get a

grip. Stand up, put the damn dress on, and prepare yourself for tonight,' her voice began to even out as she calmed down, becoming more stern than angry. She rolled her eyes at me as I stood, 'I know you think you've had it rough; no one should lose their parents.'

'Taylor,' I cut her off. 'I'll wear the dress, I'll go through all the stupid motions you want me to for tonight, but do not mention them again,' I warned her. I could nott bear the thought that all these years I had been wrong. I hated these people for what had happened, without that hate, I almost had nothing to keep me going. If it

were not for them, I would find out who it was and kill them.

‘Then we have an understanding?’ She met my gaze levelly, seeing the change in my resolve, the strength with which I now stood. I simply nodded in response, unable to wait to hear what this so-called Queen had to say.

‘About time.’ ‘Arielle?’ Jane’s timid voice echoed in my head... I ignored her. I ran my finger along the razor-sharp edge of my heels, hoping I would not need to use them. No more running. I wanted answers and it was now or never.

‘Where are you?’ I muttered to myself, looking for the passage to meet Giselle.

‘Who is it…?’ the wall, Jade whispered.

‘It’s Marissa,’ I whispered back and giggled.

‘I don’t know any Marissa so leave me alone,’ it whispered. I laughed.

‘Oh Jade, for heaven’s sake! Let her in,’ Giselle said, exaggerated. Jade crumbled, shook heavily, and fell into pieces. I quickly stepped in and again as I looked back, it was fixed

together as nothing broke. I stifled a laugh and shook my head. I remembered the way to Giselle's chamber which at first was slightly scary. If you ever considered living inside a wall, trust me it is not overly exciting. The door to Giselle's chamber creaked, lack of oil I suppose. Giselle smiled at me as I entered. She looked the same. Blue dress, same hairstyle, and beautiful blue eyes. I sat on my knees, facing her.

'How's life…?' She teased. I eyed her.

‘And you ask me…? You already know!’ I laughed. She grinned and blushed.

‘Not my fault,’ she shrugged.

‘I know. Aren’t you going to ask me why I’m here?’ I joked.

‘I’m surprised to say I don’t,’ she said, and I knew she was serious. I did not blame her. She has her own life to live. Not that she does much but hey, I cannot judge someone.

‘My parents. My old home. I want to see if they are all right,’ I tapped my hand immanently.

‘What makes you think they aren’t?’ She frowned. I shrugged. I had not forgotten one Rumor. A rumor about my sisters, one of them in love with a slave. I could never forget that. Especially hearing it from Damen made it true. She tilted her head, studying me in curiosity.

‘Alright. Close your eyes if you wish to,’ she said.

I did not. I was not scared. I watched her as her eyes began to beam green and her jaw dropped as if she saw something terrifying. She snapped back to normal and shifted her hand bringing in the mist. Colors formed in

the mist, painting a moving picture of Nora and Ella. I squealed at their presence. I was so happy to see them, I wanted to wrap my arms around them but all I would have had would be hugging myself through the mist. I calmed myself. They were in my old room, sitting on my couch.

Nora sighed but smiled gently.

‘What are you going to say to your mother and father?’ Ella asked, softly.

‘I don’t know. They won’t understand,’ Nora said, bitterly.

Ella gently clasped her hand on Nora's and gave a squeeze.

'What's his name…?' Ella asked. His name…? Who can that be? I wondered.

'I thought you knew,' Nora's eyes traveled on Ella again.

'I don't know his name,' she returned.

'He- his name is Jayden,' she said and had that warm smile on her face.

'Jayden... What's his name?' Asked Ella. 'That is what he won't tell

me. He is hiding it from me. It scares me.

There could be something bad he could have done. I'm going to meet Captain Coral today and I'll ask to look in Jordan's profile,' Nora explained. Jayden, huh. She never told me but said everything to Ella. It made me angry, hurt, and upset. Did they not trust me? My anger made my fingers curl. Calm down, Giselle's voice mysteriously spoke in my head. I was getting annoyed with that.

I calmed myself and my shoulders relaxed. I continued watching them talk.

Part: 29

‘I’m going to meet Jayden. I will be back later. Take care, Ella,’ said Nora. Ella escorted Nora to the door and they said goodbyes. It hurt that I was not talked of anymore. No one wished to talk about me. My face fell for a moment and I glanced back at the mist which changed and viewed Nora heading to meet Jayden. She walked past Captain Coral’s door and knocked on the door next to his. Come in, they yelled and she entered. It was quiet as everyone was in their room. She kept walking until she came to a halt on a

door that said, PRACTICE ROOM 59-JAYDEN.

She knocked. There was an exhausted sigh before he said, ‘Come in,’ Nora entered and their eyes lit up. He was quite handsome but held no interest of mine. His hair was glossy black that covered his forehead, his face had a relaxed jaw, his eyes were grey, he was muscular and had a dazzling smile not that I fell for it. He was dressed in armor like he ready for battle. He jumped up at the sight of Nora and within a minute she was in his arms. They laughed. He pulled back but rested his hands on her waist.

‘Nora! I haven’t seen you in a long time,’ Jayden exclaimed. Nora laughed.

‘Sorry- I was away. Had some jobs to be done. Orders from father,’ she explained. He nodded. He kissed her forehead and hugged her again.

‘I wanted to ask something,’ Nora lowered her gaze. He pulled away and took a step back.

‘No- I can’t tell! I-I don’t remember,’ he stammered. He meant his surname. What is harmful to know that?

‘I didn’t mean to frighten you…’apologized Taylor.

‘It’s all right,’ he sighed.

‘Why are you scared to tell? Is there something wrong?’ she frowned.

‘I can’t tell,’ he repeated firmly. I wanted to slap him. What did Taylor see in him? So- mean he was and stubborn!

‘Oh- I see. I will take my leave. Have a good day, Jayden,’ she said flatly and before Jayden could utter a word, Taylor had already left. The mist disappeared…

‘What happened?’ My eyes widened...

‘I- I'm not sure... I do not know. It just vanished without my command like someone is blocking it,’ she stammered.

‘I will tell you what happened later. Right now- I suggest you leave,’ frowned Giselle. I stood slowly and walked out from her chamber and Jade cracked and fell and I dropped out. I, without a word, marched straight to the garden and sat under the tree. It is night already.

I leaned against the tree and watched the stars twinkle and the moon

that glowed with no words to describe it. What happened in the chamber, with Taylor, Jayden...? I could not take it. I did not want to find out like this and I never intended to. Someone blinded me with their soft hands on my eyes. I knew who it was by just his scent of forest green and mint. His breath tickled my neck.

'Damen?' I questioned, even when I knew it was him. I giggled. He stole his hands back and leaned forward to kiss my cheek.

'What are you doing out here in the cold?' he raised his brows. He looked lustrous. At night like this one,

his sapphire eyes sparkled and glowed. They looked big too. He just wore a full-sleeved loose white shirt- and comfortable black trousers. I shrugged at him.

'Felt tired of sitting in the house so I came here,' I grinned. From behind, his arms hugged my shoulders and he looked down at me. I rose and kissed him.

I clasped the thick metal around my wrists, hearing the loud click in the empty dressing room, matching silver bands to complement the style of the gown swaying around my figure as I moved about.

‘Please, listen to me. You do not have to do this; I am sure Taylor is simply confused. They could be lying you know,’ she tried cajoling me.

‘Jane enough, just let her go. She needs to know the truth.’

‘What if it’s a trap? Taylor was lying,’ I could hear the panic in her voice.

‘I’ll be ready.’ I responded; all emotion devoid of my inner voice. I was in fight-mode, no feelings, just logic, and pure instinct. Taylor was right about running, where could I go? I needed to play along with their game. At least until I could get out alive. It

was like we were all in one big game of chess, I would wait patiently for my turn, hell, I might even get to take out their Queen.

‘Oh, please don’t let it come to that, Carmen, she’ll, we’ll be killed, tell her!’

‘I’m with her on this Jane. We need a way out. I do not care what they say, I do not trust them. What I would not give to destroy Taylor though, she’s got it coming.’ I agreed. I had misjudged her, she was strong for her size. Deadly. And me? I had been taken off guard, open, vulnerable to her words. I would not make that mistake

again. I did not train every day for anything.

'Let us do it,' Carmen's resolve was strong and I drew strength from her. I had come to depend on these two more than I had realized for the better part of my life. Jane's compassion and Carmen's fierceness. They blamed me entirely; I suppose it was lucky I had them.

'You're welcome,' Carmen said. I could feel Jane nod quietly, not needing to say anything, conveying her agreement with a wave of peaceful serenity washing through me. I sighed, slipping a ring on my right pointer.

Someone knocked quietly at the door and I turned my head to investigate. My long hair grazed the exposed skin where my dress parted. In classic Greek style, it had a low waist, with the material held in place only by a silver clasp on either shoulder. The neck and back plunged to the waistline. I stood abruptly, startled as he opened the door and stuck his head in. I had been expecting Taylor, hoping she was back to her icy-demeanor after our little tete-a-tete earlier. At least we knew where each other stood now.

I was instead surprised to see Taylor waltz in, striding straight across

the room. Before I could even utter a hello, he had slipped his arms around me and dipped me low, crushing his mouth to mine. I pulled back immediately, unsure if this is what I wanted now that my impending death was at least postponed. It was only then I realized something was amiss... It was his scent. I could not place it right, but it was different. He righted me without releasing his hold and I took the opportunity to try and pinpoint why I was suddenly feeling estranged from him.

'That isn't the way to greet your betrothed now is it?' He said with

a smirk. I filed the betrothed comment away for later. He tried to kiss me again and I ducked my head, breaking away from him. I turned to face him straight on and found what I had been looking for.

'You're not Taylor.' It was a statement, not a question. The eyes were the wrong color. Taylor's eyes were green, forest green, the darkest shade of emerald. Whoever this was, his were lighter, jade green with flecks of brown that looked gold.

'What are you talking about, it is me… 'he said, moving towards me with arms outstretched.

‘Come near me again and I promise to make you infertile. Who are you?’ I stood with my back to the door and nearly jumped out of my skin when someone laid a cool hand on my back. I spun around, amazed someone could have snuck up on me. It is like these people were dead with how silent they could be. Taylor stood before me, dressed in a silver one-shouldered gown, dripping in diamonds to match.

‘Get out,’ she ordered the stranger. He lifted one side of his mouth in a half-smile and mock bowed.

‘As you wish,’ he glanced back to me as he straightened, winked, and

then disappeared, leaving nothing but a few wisps of dark smoke hanging in the air. I pinched the bridge of my nose, ‘Do I even want to know?’ I asked aloud.

‘Probably not. Regardless, I am going to tell you. I amm surprised you knew it was not Taylor, few people can tell the twins apart. Well, at least anyone who hasn’t spent time with them.’ Oh god, twins?

‘There’s two of them?’ Carmen exclaimed I could almost visualize her excitement as if it were corporeal.

‘Oh no,’ Jane was far more apprehensive. I was on her side. This

was going to be problematic. I took comfort in the fact that I could at least tell them apart up close.

'Did he hurt you?' Taylor asked, there was something in what she had said, some emotion I could not identify.

'Not in so many words. He just got a little too friendly.' I narrowed my eyes, 'Please tell me he doesn't play that game often.'

'Not unless he has someone new to play it on. Let us go, Taylor's waiting.' I felt my stomach clench; the betrothed comment made its way to the front of my thoughts. It was time to put

a nice big stopper in whatever was between us until I figured everything out.

I took in every little detail on my way through the winding corridors, ensuring I could at least navigate this section of the palace if necessary. Multiple creatures, small in stature and all the same pale shade of grey moved about aimlessly, or at least that is what I thought. What was most frightening about them was the fact that they had no faces, it was like their translucent skin had been pulled tight across their skull, leaving only small valleys where their eyes and nose should have been.

Whenever I moved past them, their socket-eyes stared at me, their head the only part of their body that followed my Emmah. I repressed a shudder and tried to ignore them while an intense feeling of unrest began to stir beneath my skin. I focused my gaze forward now, paying attention only to the back of Taylor's dress, afraid at what else I might find lurking in the hallways. She had said I would not want to know about certain things in the palace, she was right.

It was sad that I had to break away from the lovely moment but I

wanted an answer. He brushed my hair behind my ear.

‘Have you heard of a soldier named, Jayden?’ I asked. He narrowed his eyes and studied me before saying, ‘Maybe’ It was my turn to narrow my eyes.

‘I want a specific answer,’ I said, firmly.

‘Why do you want to know about him?’ he tilted his head. I could not tell him about Giselle. Taylor… I could tell him that since he told me the rumor.

‘Eh- hmm, remember back at my house when I was to show you around in the mansion, and you told me something about one of my sisters being in love with a slave?’ I asked. He hesitated, then nodded his head slowly.

‘Well, I just figured out his name. It’s Jayden,’ I said. He raised an eyebrow.

‘Jayden? Hmm not exactly tired, were you? ‘The house is too tiring’’ he rolled his eyes. Here we go again.

‘Please. Tell me,’ I pleaded.

‘Sure, my love. But why do you want to know? What’s his life to do with yours?’ He retorted.

‘Its... It iss nothing to do with me- I cannot tell you just yet... ‘I stammered. He glared at me. The deathly glare. The one that makes you kill yourself if you were to choose between death and his glare. I had wished to die right there.

‘Fine. Do not tell me. But as a husband I have a right to know for some man my wife seems to be so interested in,’ he got to his feet and walked in the direction of the stables.

‘Damen! No, you have the wrong thought. Please come back!’ I called after him, but he did not stop. I bit my lip to stop myself from crying but this time it did not work. I whimpered, and tears slid down my cheeks.

I woke up at the sound of birds chirping above me. I massaged my eyes and saw the sun, fully risen. I had fallen asleep in the garden.

Damen... Something about Damen. The-misunderstanding about Jayden.

Damn it! You should have told him, he is yours after all... Giselle's voice spoke in my thoughts.

Maybe- I should have. He would have understood. He always did. I rose to my feet and ran to the stables. Laura was still asleep but a little step from mine, her eyes opened instantly and she neighed at my arrival. I jogged to her and hugged her. My beautiful Laura who I have not seen for a long time now. I am quickly grand on the opposite shelter. Blackwell was nowhere in sight.

He was gone... Which meant Damen had not returned home last

night. Fear jabbed in my chest. I immediately let Laura out and sat on her back. She galloped towards the main gates as fast as she could, which, believe me, she was amazingly fast. The guards opened the gates and Laura galloped in the forest. I pulled her mane and she stopped. I glanced sideways at the forest and had no idea where to start. That is when I heard it. It was a faint cry. It was a shrilling cry. Like a… Horse- a horse like… Blackwel. There was a yell and after that, Blackwel's cry no longer echoed in the forest.

Taylor never once spoke a word to me, I did not even register a tilt of her head, so she must have assumed I would be behind her the whole way. I would have tried wandering off if not for the fact that she would have dragged me by my hair to our destination. I made a mental note to provoke her later, so I could get a serious gauge on her skills as a fighter.

Hell, I would try and glean some information from Taylor as well - nothing like a little stealthy digging to find out what you wanted to know.

Taylor turned right down a set of stairs that opened into a foyer. Just

beyond the foyer was another balcony. Outside looked as dismal as ever. Ever-roaming clouds of black curled in on themselves, a giant blanket of deepest night spanning the never-ending sky. There was not even a horizon. I felt like I was staring into an ocean in the dead of night, it was unsettling like at any minute it would rain from the sky, drowning us all. It was a lost sky, belonging to a lost city in a lost world. There was nothing but death here. I did not pause to take another look, it would only cause me to become more afraid and desperate than I already was because, in that dark void of a sky,

there was no light. No light meant no way out.

The light clicking of solid silver heels on tile echoed as we walked in silence, I noted how quiet Jane and Carmen seemed to be, even they had no idea what was to become of tonight.

Suddenly Taylor stopped and turned her head towards me, barely.

‘Once we go through here, you are on your own. I have done as I was asked and got you ready- but the rest is up to you. Do you want answers? Then I suggest you behave yourself and listen to Taylor. He’ll be all the help you need.’ She disappeared through a set of

opaque curtains stretching from floor to ceiling, the only form or doorway into whatever lay beyond. I stepped forward, about to follow her when I could not help but pause. What was I doing?

Taylor seemed to think- I was something special, unknown. What if they were wrong? Once they figured out, I was not who they thought, I would be killed instantly. I was just some human girl, one with albeit the worst luck in the world, but the wrong girl none-the-less. I ran through all the possible scenarios in my head. Then again, a tiny voice whispered within,

what if they were right? They could tell me the answers I had craved since childhood. The fate of my parents, my place in all this, it was only a step away.

It could also be a trap.

I took a deep breath, and made the final decision, to end my life.

I stepped through because really, there was never another option.

The soft material of the curtain parted around me, and I was again amazed by how unreal this place was, it was like I had stepped into a twisted fairy tale. I was at the top of a

descending elliptical staircase. From the landing where I stood, I investigated the grand hall lit by glowing icicles. They hung from the ceiling forming chandelier-like crystals, glowing somehow from within - a pure, white light. The bottom of the staircase encircled a fountain flowing with black water, and the long sides of the hall were lined perpendicularly with perfectly cut pools filled with the same liquid, each sporting its fountain in the center. The floor was like a giant dark mirror, reflecting the light from the ceiling in a muted, changed sort of way.

The floor-to-roof windows that made up the walls were lined by the same kind of curtains I had just stepped through and at the opposite end of the hall was a raised dais, upon which sat a very real, crystal throne. And a very real figure, whose head turned towards where I stood the second, I had entered, even from this distance. Between us, spinning and circling in perfect synchronization were easily hundreds of people – if that is what you could call them. I moved to the balcony and placed one hand on the iced railing, surprised to find it was not cold, while I simply stared out across the crowd. I never believed anything

like this could have existed. Monsters did nott need ballrooms; I could not help but feel confused.

'What do you think?' Taylor came to stand by my side, following the Emmah of my vision as it swept across the room, taking in all the grandeur.

'I-It's…' I stuttered, trying to find the right words to describe what I was seeing.

He turned me towards him, placing both hands on my shoulders and I tore my eyes away unwillingly.

'…A- lot to take in?' he supplied for me, bending his head closer to

mine, holding my gaze. I swallowed uncomfortably and nodded; my throat had gone dry. An army of undead soldiers and hellish creatures?

No problem. A fancy ballroom filled with glamorous beings and whimsical music? Nope, lead me to the door. My hands started to shake. I kept replaying a constant image of myself falling down the stairs ungracefully and landing in an embarrassing pile at the bottom while all these people turned to laughter.

-And-

‘I can’t do it.’ The words burst from my lips. I shook my head at him,

‘Seriously, it will be a mistake taking me down there.’ He smiled and rolled his eyes at me.

‘You’ll be fine. Trust me.’ He straightened and stepped back from me, offering a single hand. I eyed it warily. My independent nature demanded I walk down those stairs alone, while the other (unbelievably freaked out) part of me rationalized that it would be more appropriate, not to mention help my blame tenfold, to take his hand.

As if Laura read my thoughts, she raced towards the trees, following the sound that came no more. My heart

was beating hard against my chest and all I wanted to do was run back for help. But you cannot. Damon needs you. Besides, you are not defenseless. Remember that jonabeeb stone? The one he gave you? I hastily searched for the Jonna has a stone in my bag. Yes! Thank goodness for that.

The Jonnahas stones are powerful enough to kill a fallen angel on sight. It was made of cobalt glass that preserved the rays from the sun.

Throw it directly at or by a fallen angel, and he dies. throw it a human and he burns. the stone was made by the evil angel Killers who used

it as last resort to kill an evil angel. How Damen got his hands on one of these? Well, even I do not have the answer to that. I held the Jonna has the stone in my hand tightly, careful not to be too hard. I could do this. I knew I could. And then everything went wrong.

A bullet whizzed past me and Laura neighed loudly. I clung tightly to her mane as she sharply turned to the Emmah of the Wolman March.

The Jonnahas stone flew from my grip and burst into flames as soon as it hit the ground. Oh no. The flames hastily incinerated the green grass,

slowly spreading on to the trees. Laura ran deeper and deeper into the forest which got darker and darker because of the leafless tree branches concealing the sunshine. the branches were long and sharp, cutting my cheeks. I threw an arm over my eyes and they clawed at my dress, ripping my sleeve.

The crackling sound of trees burning roared in my eyes. Black soot began to cover the trees and the smoke made Laura slow down. I too was finding it difficult to catch my breath as adrenaline pumped through my veins. My lungs coughed out the smoke I inhaled, and I was choking. No way was

I going to die here. Laura had had enough. She dropped on all fours and rested her head. I got off her back. I knew I was going to regret this, but I had to leave her. Not looking back even when she neighed sadly, I ran like hell was chasing me.

I deliberated for only a moment before exhaling in a rush and grabbing his hand - before I could change my mind. He pulled me gently to his side, his larger body making me feel small and vulnerable all over again. He laced our fingers together and laid a kiss against my temple before moving ahead of me to descend the stairs - never

letting go of my hand. His hands were so much larger than mine, not bulky, but soft with long graceful fingers. They fit near-perfectly with my (now) smooth skin. I wondered how long it would be until I once again had blisters and callouses from weapons training and groaned inwardly at the thought. I felt a tug on my hand and realized I hadad zoned out completely, we were at the bottom of the stairs, facing a thousand pairs of eyes... eyes that were not human.

They parted as Taylor led me forward, my own eyes determinedly set on the ground so that I would not have

to face their judgmental looks. I held Taylor's hand with both of mine and he squeezed them reassuringly. I looked up at him from under my lashes, the barest peek and saw his dark green eyes gazing back into mine with warmth. I looked back at the ground praying I had not gone red in front of this crowd. Losing my composure, what little of it I had, over a boy? How embarrassing. Taylor took a deep breath and we came to a stop. We had reached the end of the hall and I lifted my eyes, up to the dais where she sat, eyes the color of pure, glistening snow, staring right at me.

I could not believe what I saw. She was unreal, porcelain skin without a single mark, long silky hair that seemed more silver than blonde, and ice glittering on her lashes. Her dress fanned out behind her as she stood, giving the impression of glorious white wings as her feathery gown settled. She parted her wine-red lips to speak, the only point of color on her otherwise frosted demeanor. Taylor cleared his throat quietly and I tore my eyes away from her majesty in awe, surprise tinged with a little (sorry, a lot) of uncertainty clear across my features. He was looking at me in amusement and subtly winked at me as he bowed to

the goddess before us. I followed suit, bowing from the waist as seemed the only natural before such a being. I had managed to close my mouth when I had stopped staring and now focused my eyes on the floor, thinking of how much of an idiot I had just seemed. Great first impression on my part... not.

'Today we take the first step to reclaim what is rightfully ours.' Her melodic voice, strong and beautiful, echoed in the hall around us. 'My children, no more shall we hide in the shadows. They will build monuments to our memory so that one day all will know we remain forever the makers of

our destinies. Nothing will- have denied us,' at this all the creatures in the room shouted in triumph and applause, some issuing a shrill shouting like a banshee, and one bird-like being whooping and whistling in strange contemptuous. I automatically stepped closer to Taylor, my body seeking the protection of his while my mind was preoccupied with the celebrations taking place around us.

The music started up again and the crowd dispersed to dance with renewed fervor. I thought I saw Taylor for a moment before the crowd turned and she was gone. Somehow Taylor had

also seemed to disappear, I had not seen her since she stepped through the curtain. Surely, she must be around here somewhere?

Taylor's hand closed around mine and he began leading me forward, I followed his lead as we trailed behind the Queen's retreating figure. We were being led behind the throne through another curtain.

Once through, all traces of music from the hall behind us were muted. The room was small, like the rest of the palace with a small balcony to the right. There was extraordinarily little furniture, a glass table adorned

with an elaborate black-rose flower display and various crystal wine-glasses, a settee and chaise set-up in front of the balcony, and another doorway leading out of the room.

The Queen strode over to the chaise and reclined gracefully, motioning for us to sit opposite her on the settee. Wine glasses filled with the darkest ruby-colored liquid were given to us by a da’veen with black skin, the only color’ coming from the rose-petals that made up (her?) it’s the hair and the matching red lips. The da’veen exited through the door and I stared at the liquid, the walls, anywhere but at

the Queen, whose gaze I could feel burning into my skin. She cleared her throat delicately and I reluctantly returned her gaze, afraid of what was to come.

‘Do you know who I am?’ she spoke quietly, now that it was not directed at a large crowd you could hear the almost musical quality to her voice, like bells... or angels. I could not decide which was more likely. She glowed, a faint white illuminating from within her skin.

‘You’re the Queen,’ I replied, unsure of the answer she wanted. If not

for the eyes, I could almost believe she was out of place down here.

‘Indeed, I am,’ she paused and narrowed her eyes slightly before asking her next question. ‘And who does that make you?’

I did not answer straight away. I looked at Taylor who just nodded at me, I was not sure what she meant.

‘I’m Arielle?’ It came out sounding like a question.

‘Are you? It sounds as though you aren’t even sure of who you are…’ Two minutes with her and already my

head was in circles. What did she mean? Of course, I knew who I was.

‘I am Arielle Deveraux,’ I said, ‘you know who I am.’ I said more confidently now. She smiled, pleased with my answer.

‘It’s lovely to finally meet you, Arielle. We have much to discuss,’ I nodded. ‘Please,’ she motioned to my glass. I looked at Taylor once more, and he sipped his own but looked only out beyond the balcony, offering me no aid. Looks like I was on my own with this one. I stared at the glass, watching the ripples glisten in the liquid. I took a deep breath a lifted the rim to my lips,

closing my eyes briefly as the first drop touched my tongue, it was sweet, like perfume with its toxifying scent. The flavor was a wine blend of fruits unknown to me, but amazing none the less. It was incredible.

'You are brave,' it was not a question, but a statement. 'I like to think so,' I responded. The Queen's face turned solemn, 'There is much I have to tell you, but I feel it will be better if I show you. She sat up straight and extended a single, white hand to me. The faint light I mentioned radiated intensely off her extended hand now, I knew something strange was about to

happen. I hesitated for only a moment before I slowly reached out my own and she clasped them together.

Closing her eyes, I felt the cold from her hand creep up my arm like ice. This is what I had been waiting for, my answers, for everything. I could feel it. Suddenly, I was blinded by a pure, white light that enveloped the room, and everything fell away...

I felt the sensation of falling, the tightening of my stomach muscles as they clenched and curled, trying to accommodate for the shift in gravity. My feet were planted firmly on the soil, but I staggered slightly; the hand still

clasped tightly on my own righted me before it let go. My palm stung, and I looked to see tendrils of ice encasing my hand and forearm that seemed to connect deep within the tissue of my flesh. I shivered involuntarily; the chills traveled down my spine… like frostbite was eating away at all the warmth in my body.

‘Do not be afraid, the ice can’t hurt you.’ The Queen spared me a glance over her shoulder before walking ahead, towards the edge of a deep ravine. I stared at my palm worriedly for a moment longer before taking the opportunity to look around

and try unsuccessfully to get my mind off my frozen appendage - it was a wasted effort. There was nothing here, no life, no sound; it was a barren wasteland, populated only by grey dust and dead trees.

'Where are we?' I asked, my voice echoing down the ravine as I approached the edge, standing by the Queen.

'Earth. Or what was left of it... 'her demeanor had completely shifted, the look in her eyes hollow as if she were somewhere else entirely. She closed her eyes and the ground began to shake, a deep rumbling as thick

smoke began to spew forth from the ravine, spreading across the land opposite us like a disease. The sky darkened and thundered, illuminating with flashes of lightning what I could only assume were creatures from the Underworld moving within the black mists. The shadows of thousands of monsters, hunters, hounds, and many, many more creatures I had never seen up close; and now hoped I had never had to.

I took a few steps back; so far, they were not paying attention to us, it was like we did not exist, but I still did not like what was unfurling before my

eyes. I thought that it was an enjoyable time for us to go, however, it seemed like the Queen was waiting for something. ‘Which is fine by me if that is what their army looks like... leave her here and let us get outta here’ even Carmen was scared, her voice trembled in fear and awe. Jane could not speak, I felt her presence in my mind contract like it was trying to disappear. ‘No,’ she whispered, ‘I just can’t watch this, I know where we are... ‘

‘Care to share with the rest of the class?’ Carmen’s bravado was wavering, ‘you can’t fight what you don’t know.’ Jane shook her head in

response, ‘Just… wait. You’ll see.’ With that, she completely disappeared, somehow retreating to some corner of my mind far away from what was happening. I could not say I blamed her; I was feeling the urge to run away screaming myself. I was no match for an army, I’d rather live to fight another die.

I cleared my throat, almost afraid to speak in case one of the creatures saw us. The Queen tilted her head in my direction but still seemed far away in her little world.

‘They can’t see us, or hear us,’ she spoke softly. This is nothing but a

memory. One you need to see… ‘Crack, lightning struck the ground violently, spraying sparks in all directions. The creatures bayed and screeched, the smoke forming a circle around the scorched earth as if they were afraid. More lightning struck the ground at random before a mighty roll of thunder echoed throughout the sky and across the deserted plain.

Lights fell from the sky like silver rain, I had to cover my eyes from the sheer bite force of it all. The lights were so bright my eyes watered but I could not force myself to look away. At first, I thought they were clouds or

birds but as they crashed towards the earth at an alarming speed, they became clearer. They were from the first plane. The High plane, Heaven, Valhalla, Paradise, call it what you will, but these were the majestic creatures from centuries ago, missing from the world for a Millenia. I had a feeling I was about to see why.

‘Don’t be fooled by their appearance of valor,’ the Queen turned to me and grabbed a firm hold of my shoulder, staring right at me now. She shook my shoulder, hard, ‘they are not what they seem. You are witnessing a

battle between our two realms on the only plane we can coexist.'

'Not what they seem? They are angels! The saviors of humankind! They are protecting us from the likes of you,' I broke away from her, confused why she would show me this memory when it only furthered my belief that they were evil and cared about nothing except the destruction of all life.

'Then you are a fool,' she hissed through clenched teeth. Her snow eyes grew dark, 'What do you think happened here? There is almost nothing left of your kind, they were wiped out by your so-called Angels who

care nothing for casualties of war. They seek only the extermination of my kind, whatever the cost!'

'You're lying!' I yelled, turning back to watch the two races do battle. I had never seen such carnage, the Queen bared her teeth angrily but turned back to watch the battle unfold, I was sure she was biding her time, trying to find a way to convince me that I was wrong. What looked like a faerie was blasting a group of hounds, releasing a line of golden fire that moved of its own accord to surround the group. It contracted like a rope, a razor-thin rope, sharper than the

deadliest of knives as it sliced the animals in two across the middle. I looked away, trying to remember that this is war, there must be a losing side.

They say I killed Bobby Shipparro from down the street. They say that I was the one who drove the knife into his heart and then dumped him in the sewer. But it was nott me, I know it was not. Yet still, people think I did it. Why is that? Just because I am different. Just because I am special.

My mom believes me, she believes me to the moon and back. My sisters, all five of them, hate me. Of course, they would believe I killed

Bobby too. That is why I must leave. That is why I will leave.

Being able to turn invisible will not make leaving town hard.

‘...I wish you were here, cause sometimes- I get lonely- I guess I’m not the only, new girl in town! Mama, I promise that I’ll be alright- I’ll call and say I love you every night- I’m just trynna right the story of my life!...’

I sat on the bus and tried to make the shape of the blurry figures that sped by. The rain had fogged up the glass and the only thing I could see were trees. The man who sat next to me was snoring like a pig and the kid

behind me kept kicking my chair. Even still, I sat through it, hoping to get as far as possible.

Tucking my legs into my chest and wrapping my arms around my shins, I leaned my head against the fogged-up window in hopes of finding sleep. However far this bus went, it would be my last stop.

~*~

A desolate place with dusty shop windows and old men on rocking chairs. That is the quickest way I can explain the town I stopped far enough in. Dust swirled around my boots and clung to my shirt. I did the best I could,

holding two large suitcases, and walked the dirt road that led to the center of town.

I needed to find a Motel and I needed to find it fast.

‘Are you ok dear?’ I did not even notice the little old lady who happened to walk up to me. I was a young girl with no place to go.

‘Yes- ma’am I’m fine’ I lied, putting on a fake smile that I hoped would work. She saw right through it.

‘I beg to differ. How old are you sweetie?’

I did not know for sure if I should tell this woman my real age. I looked old for my age, so I decided that lying would be my best bet.

‘Seventeen ma’am, fresh out of high school,’ I said abruptly, trying to make my way around her and avoid further confrontation. But old ladies do not give up so quickly.

‘I may be old, but I’m not stupid. Now, you wait here and I’ll see how much cash I got left in my purse’ the old woman turned to walk back up her porch steps and I took the opportunity to disappear.

‘If you have a bank account, I could write you a che-e-’ the woman could no longer see me, and if I held my breath long enough, she could no longer hear me either. I watched the woman look at where I was standing with a bewildered expression on her face. She looked both ways down the dirt pettah and then shrugged, walking back up the stairs slowly.

I kept myself invisible for a while longer as I took the Emmah down into town. I tried not to draw too much attention to myself. I was not doing such an excellent job since I got curious onlookers. It seemed that this town did

not get tourists often. I spotted a cruddy sign that read ‘Motel’ or at least tried to.

Walking in, it smelt like polished leather and mothballs. Glad that I was finally able to put down my suitcases, I trudged over to the desk and hit the rusty bell. It had not been used in a while.

‘Well- how may- I help you- little miss?’ Came the strong country accent from around the back. Anybody back in the city would have called it pure hillbilly.

‘Um, I would like a room’ I said, hesitant at what they would think

when they see me. I do not think fifteen-and-a-half-year-old girls get rooms just like that.

‘Well, of course, I mean you came to a Motel didn’t cha?’ there were hoarse coughing afterward and then the sound of boots shuffling across the hardwood floor.

‘Yah,’ I tried to stand a little taller as the man came around the corner. He was what you could call your average western cowboy. He had the scruffy mustache, the ten-gallon hat, the beer gut, the boots, and the big buckled belt.

‘You can call me Chuck darling,’ he said, fixing his belt and sitting down on a stool right in front of the counter. He opened a dusty binder and flipped to a fresh page.

‘Ok, I’m going to need to see ID and social security number’…, he said formally, twisting his big mustache. I nearly choked and my face turned bright red. I had forgotten all about needing an ID.

‘I- um- well- I’ I was startled as Chuck began to laugh as he had never laughed before.

‘Gets runaways every time. Wha-choo-tink- dis here is? One a dang-

damn fancy hotels? I do not need any ID. Just your name and the cash upfront' Chuck smacked his right knee and got his pencil ready.

'Wait, how do you know I'm a runaway?' I said, beginning to rethink the whole idea of running away. Was it that easy to read me?

'Young gals like you always coming in and out of displacing' I did not know much about Motels, but I knew it did not look like people had ever set foot in that place.

'Now, your name?'

I hesitated before saying it clear and strong, ‘Taylor, Taylor Locket’

... You know all about this dream I gotta chase, I get a little closer every day~

California’s not that far away~

I am not that far away~

<3

Chuck folded the money I gave him and gave me a bright smile.

‘Now, let us get you to your room.’

I went to go pick up my suitcases but was immediately stopped.

‘No, no, no, I got me a bell boy for that’ I covered my ears as Chuck let out an ear-piercing whistle ‘Ricky! Get your ass on down here boy!’

Then came Ben, a tall lanky boy who seemed bored out of his wits.

His white t-shirt was stained with grease and his jeans had plenty of holes.

His blond hair was tinted with dirt and when I shook his hand it nearly swallowed my little fingers.

‘I’ll get your suitcases Miss Locket’ he said in a tone that said, ‘I have to do this every time!.’

‘Thanks,’ I said just as bluntly.

‘Well I think you two will get along simply fine, Now, your room Miss. Lovett’ Chuck interrupted, guiding me by the shoulder down the hall. Ben followed suit and as we walked down the long hallway, I took in the western atmosphere of it all. From the peeling wallpaper to the antique furniture, everything reminded me of old western movies.

‘Miss Lovett, your room’ with what I think was a grand flourish,

Chuck opened a wood stained door that creaked on the hinges.

The room- that, I was scooted into was nice. The flower print bed sheets and cream-colored walls all held a homey feeling to them. The white curtains let in enough sunlight and the wood finished furniture was nice.

‘I like it, thanks’ I said, sitting down on the bed and watching Ben set my suitcases down.

‘Now Ben here is my son and he will be here a lot so if you ever need anything, just ask Ben here’ Chuck informed. I looked over at Ben and his

face held no intention of getting me anything.

‘Can I go now?’ He asked, ‘I was working on the car.’

Chuck looked a little disappointed in his boy’s behavior but finally gave him the nod to go. After getting the schedule for complimentary breakfast and dinner and getting a stern ‘This money will pay for seven days! After that, you have to pay again to stay longer!’ Chuck finally left.

After Chuck left it was lonely but I kept busy unpacking the few belongings I had. I tucked my two big

red suitcases under the bed and sighed as I stood there.

I did it.

I got away.

I was free.

But where would I go afterward? I could not stay in this small town, paying one hundred dollars a week, my money would soon run out. I needed to find a permanent place, like that, it was easy. I dropped down on to the bed and breathed deeply. I scooped my reddish-brown hair into a bun and tried to relax.

But Relaxing is hard when you are a runaway. There are so many fresh faces, and beautiful places in this town~ I am learning the ropes- on this crazy road, I am going down.

When- I say small town, I mean it! As I look around, everyone knows everybody and when I walk down the street, I get nothing but stares. And Chuck says he gets Runaways all the time. There was not much to do so I walked back to the Motel. I was bored out of my mind and I cannot help it if I got curious when I heard a noise coming from the back.

It sounded like a drill and I knew I was not allowed to, but I slipped behind the counter. Easing open a back door, I stuck my head out to find a garage. There were tools all over the place and a big blue car sat in the middle of it all. Two legs stuck out from under it and I intuitively knew it was Ben, working on his car.

He had been quite rude during breakfast so I thought it would be best to go invisible. I did not want to get kicked out of the Motel for trespassing. I closed the door silently behind me and went over to the center of the garage. Whatever Ben was doing, he did not

even notice the two cans I accidentally knocked over.

My humor got the best of me and I found myself opening the car door and getting in. After sitting behind the wheel, I reached out and did one long honk. The sound of Ben's head hitting metal satisfied me.

'Hey! Who's there?!' of course Ben couldn't see me and I loved the puzzled expression on his face.

'Must have hit the wrong thing' he murmured to himself. He went back to the car and this time when I honked the horn, I made myself visible.

‘What the-’ Ben came from beneath the car and looked as angry as a city rat.

‘You know you’re not allowed back here!’ he came around to the driver’s seat and pulled me out.

‘I’m sorry, I was just… Bored…’

‘I could have gotten a concussion!’ Ben held the spot on his head where there seemed to be a not on it and I started to feel a little guilty.

‘Well I’ll be going now’ note to self, Ben is not so easy to slip away from.

‘Oh no you don’t’ he said, pulling me back to face him, ‘I will tell my father and you will be out of here first thing in the morning!’

‘Why do you hate me so much?’ I could not help but ask.

‘Because- you runaways are all the same! You come, you make trouble, and then I have to clean up the aftermath.’

‘Well you’re in luck, cause I’m not like other runaways,’ I whispered, Ben gave me a weird look and was about to say more when Chuck came strutting into the garage.

‘Oh goody! You all are getting along! Good for yall!’ He picked up what looked to be an old wooden pipe and then left.

‘I’m going to go freshen up for dinner’ I said quickly before Ben could ask me anything else.

I had said too much already.

I am making my way~

No one said that it would be easy, trust me, believe me,

I am where I belong~

I am wearing my favorite jeans and a white flowy top with the swirly pink lines. My favorite black boots are

hugging my shins comfortably. I am waiting on the porch for Ben to come out. Ever since our little Garage talk, things have been a little different between Ben and me. He does nott blow me off all the time and is not as snappy.

He told me there was a place he wanted to show me tonight so here I was, waiting on the porch. Finally, the door opened, and there stood Ben, but not in his grungy greasy way. Let us just say, he cleans up nicely.

‘Ready to go? He asked, starting down the porch and not waiting for the answer.

‘Sure, so where are we going? We did not do the holding hands thing and I was glad.

‘It’s a surprise, kind of’ Ben looked like this was awkward for him and I loved it.

‘Mister Grumpy has a surprise for me?! Wow! I thought you hated me?’ I said in a surprised happy go lucky tone. Ben gave me a look that said, ‘Quit it!’

‘Okay- ok, sorry I’ll shut it’

‘Good, you’re better that way’ I could not help but playfully punch Ben and he cracked a smile. It was different

from our usual cold stares, but it was nice. The town looked different at night, but I hardly got to notice as I and Ben trudge up a hill.

'You're not going to murder me here so that I'm finally out of your hair, are you?' I said, getting a weird look from Ben.

'Good, I was hoping not'

We walked up a little further and then suddenly Ben stopped.

'Okay, I know you've been kind of missing the city so I wanted to show you this, do you mind if I-' Ben went to cover my eyes with his hand and I let

him. They were warm and smelt like diesel. We walked a little further and then stopped.

‘Okay, here it- is’ I gasped as Ben removed his hand and I started at… the City.

The bright lights all molding together, the tall buildings, and flashing signs. I could just smell the excitement wafting over to me, even though it was miles away. I do not know where the tears started to well up from, but it was like all the things I was trying to run away from, came back to me.

I tried to get as far away as possible, but it seems, my plan failed.

‘Taylor, are you okay?’ THEN- came Ben’s voice as he looked over at me. I then remembered that the only thing he heard from me was a gasp and he was getting worried.

‘I’m- I’m’ I did not know what I was.

‘Was this a bad idea?’ He said, coming to stand right next to me.

‘No, it’s- it’s’ I tried to croak out the words but they did not come.

‘It was, I’m sorry, I just thought you would like it, I thought it would

make you feel better after staying in this boring town, I thought-’ I hugged Ben before he could even finish. I did not want him to feel bad for doing something he thought would make me feel better. At first, he was shocked by the gesture but then slowly he put his hands on my back.

It felt nice that way. It felt warm. I could hear Ben’s heart thumping in his chest and I could feel his chin grazing the top of my head. I turned my head and looked out at the view. This is what I had wanted all along.

‘Well, well, well… Look at what we got here’ came an unfair Taylor voice from behind us.

We are miles apart- You're, in my heart- I keep you with me everywhere I go...

I faintly heard Ben whisper ‘Oh no,’ as he pulled me behind him.

He stepped in front of me and I could faintly see the figure before us.

The only light was a flickering lamp post that was already dim.

‘Ben,’ the figure said as if regarding him.

‘Dan,’ Ben said, using the same tone. Whatever was going on here, there was rivalry in the air.

‘So, you found another runaway toy with’ my insides shivered, whoever that guy was, he had a mysterious air to him. And what did he mean ‘Another Runaway to toy with?’

‘Not true Dan, just say what you’re here for!’ Ben was getting tense. I could feel it under my fingers that laid on his back.

‘Just to fool around, that’s all’ It was then that I got a good look at this guy. He had stepped a little further into the light and I could ake out jet black

hair and surprisingly bright blue eyes that seemed smoked over.

‘And just what does that mean?’ Ben asked, backing up a little, it was obvious that he feared this Dan guy. I do not know why but I went invisible. I took my hands off Ben’s back, I assumed that he would just think I ran away or something.

I was not asking for what came next.

Dan looked right at me. I mean RIGHT at me, but I was invisible. I tried not to gasp and held my breath as best as I could. Even though he was talking to Ben he continued to look at me.

‘Oh look, I made the Runaway do what she likes best. Runaway- maybe she caught on to my warning’ Dan was covering for me, but why?

‘What are you talking about?’ Ben turned around suddenly and a frown formed on his face. He could not see me, but I could see him. He scratched the back of his head and turned to walk back down the hill. ‘Where are you going, Ben? Don’t you want to talk some more?’ Dan teased as Ben pushed past him.

‘I’m going to find Taylor, what does it look like I’m doing?’ I felt bad

for tricking Ben like that, but I panicked.

Ben disappeared into the blackness and me, still invisible, slowly made my way towards this Dan guy. I needed to sneak past him.

‘It’s no use keeping yourself invisible’ he said after a while, he shoved his hands into his pockets and looked in my direction. I concentrated and made myself visible again, shocked that this guy could see me.

I mean see me.

‘How- How could you-?’ He cut me off with a light chuckle that made me shiver.

‘How could I see you? Well, I didn’t see you, I sensed you’ he said with a smirk, suddenly he was walking closer and closer towards me.

‘You, sensed me?’ I was starting to feel queasy inside and suddenly, I did not know how to use my legs. Dan lifted his hand to my face and I stayed frozen still as his big warm hands explored my face.

‘What color are your eyes?’ Couldn’t he see what color my eyes were?

‘How could you sense me?’ I asked, ignoring the question, I had never known anyone who could see right through my invisibility.

‘There are people like you Taylor’ Dan said, dropping his hand to his side, ‘They may not have the same ability as you, but they aren’t normal either.’

‘What exactly are you trying to say?’ I breathed, wrapping my arms around me.

‘You’re not alone- Taylor, come with me.’

‘Because you know I’d walk a thousand miles if I could just see you… Tonight…’

Taylor - (thousand miles)

I do not know what compelled me to follow Dan. It was the part where he said- ‘There are others like you.’ Whatever it was, it had me following right behind him. The first thing I noticed was that Dan walked a little bit differently than most people. He would stare off into the distance and walk on, stopping suddenly in front of things he seemed to just realize was there.

Then it clicked, was Dan blind? It made sense. He had touched up my

face and then he asked me what color my eyes were. But it still did not explain the fact that he could walk perfectly fine without a cane or some seeing-eye dog.

'I can smell fear and confusion all over you' he said suddenly, breaking the silence that had developed. We were walking down an Emmah that seemed to lead to a woodsy area. Where was this man taking me?

'That's not strange at all' I do not know where the sarcasm came from, but it made Dan laugh.

'If you were wondering, I am blind. Does that clear up some of the

confusion?’ Dan swerved around a barrel and kept walking in our given direction.

‘Kind of, it still doesn’t explain how you seem like you can see where you’re going’ I prodded, folding my arms, and shivering over the cool night air.

‘I can sense things… I sensed that barrel and then moved out of the way just in time’

‘But that still doesn’t expel.’

‘You never told me what color your eyes were’ Dan continued,

signaling that the other conversation was over.

‘Green, my eyes are green’ I sighed. This guy was persistent.

‘And your hair?’ Dan reached out and grabbed a piece of my hair between his fingers. I took it away from him and answered bluntly.

‘Reddish-brown, brownish-red…’

‘What a beauty you must be if only I could see you…’

I could not help but blush and was glad Dan did not see me. I did not

want to give him the satisfaction of getting to me.

‘I can smell the sudden nervousness on you, a blush maybe’ I silently cursed his strange abilities and tried to mask the nerves with anger.

Dan chuckled lightly, and we continued our hike to nowhere.

~*~

I only saw stuff like this in movies or comics that lined the stands in the big city. Never in my days did I expect to see it up close and personal. Dan had finally led me to a rundown shack with a door falling off its hinges.

I was furious to see that this is where Dan had to lead me and was hoping he had not dragged me here so he could bust a move.

'You have got to be kidding me, right?' I had said, walking through the doorway, and from the corner of my eye, a rat ran by.

'Not at all,' Dan walked in and after asking me if anyone was coming this way, he tapped five times on a wood panel in the corner, and poof! A door swung open. That is when I took the ladder that leads down to what seemed like a basement. What I saw

when I landed firmly on the floor made me gasp.

People, lots, and lots of people walking around, hanging out, going in and out of doors, and doing extraordinary things. From what I could see, each person had a different ability and it was cool to see everyone so used to the unnatural. I was standing in a big command area that had two stairs in the back leading up to a balcony that had more halls.

On my right was a door and, on my left, was another door.

‘Those are the other ways to get in, on the right is an elevator and

on the left his tube slide. Both in different locations around town,' great and we got the ladder.

Dan's hand reached my back as we walked through the crowd that seemed to split an Emmah when they saw us coming. I guessed that they all knew Dan was blind. We took one of the stairs and I found myself on the second floor. Doors were lining the hall as far as I could see.

Dan lead me down the hall and I could hear different sounds coming from each room. Parties, a bunch of boys watching football, soap opera,

Brittany Spears, and other sounds that should not be repeated.

‘Here’s your room’ I found myself facing a door with the crooked numbers ‘64.’

Dan opened it to a small room with contemporary furniture, a nice sized bed, a Minnie fridge, a bathroom, a good-sized closet. It was as I looked at the bed that I realized how tired I was. I sat down on the bed and Dan turned to leave when reality hit me.

‘Wait- wait- wait, you can’t just take me in the middle of the night to some unknown place and then drop me at a room.

‘Isn’t that what you did just a few days ago?’ Dan asked, walking up to my bed, ‘You came to an unknown town and then dropped yourself off at a room in some cruddy Motel.’

I hated how great Dan was in psychology and even though he was blind I scolded him.

‘What do you want from me?’ I said, feeling tired and about ready to give up.

‘I want for you to realize where you belong,’ I shuddered as Dan looked my way. Even though he was blind I felt like he was staring into my soul.

‘How long did you expect to pay for your Motel room anyway? Listen, I already have people getting your things for you. You just wait and see; this place will feel like home soon.’

Dan did not let me ask any more questions. He strolled out of the room and closed the door, leaving a silence that teased me. Since I did not know what way was out of this place and because I was so tired, I slipped under the covers and quickly fell asleep.

I woke up feeling dazed and unsure of where I currently was. I was laying on my stomach and there were

sheets tangled around my legs. I tried to pry my eyes open and look around. I noticed that I was wearing my favorite jeans. That is when all the memories from last night came rushing back to me at full force.

Ben, Dan, this secret place. I began to wonder if it was such a clever idea to follow Dan in this strange place. I sat up and tried to rake through my disheveled hair, peering at the clock on the nightstand, it was seven o’ nine in the morning. Groaning, I pushed my legs up and over the bed and pushed my feet into my boots.

I did not know what I was planning to do. I walked over to the bathroom and rinsed out my mouth before going over to the door and opening it a crack. From what it looked like, these people were bleachers, staying up all night and then crashing in the morning. I tiptoed out into the hall, closing my door quietly behind me.

Walking down the hall felt strange, it was so quiet that you could have heard a pin drop. I finally made it to the stairs and cringed when a step creaked. I did not hear movement coming from one of the other rooms, so

I continued, taking each step one at a time.

I finally came to the ground area and shook my head at the mess these people left. There were beer bottles, tissues, and crumpled up pieces of paper. Jackets and pair-less shoes all over the place, soda cans. The place looked like a ransacked fraternity home or sorority house.

I saw a whitewashed door on the other end of the second set of stairs and decided to check it out. I needed out of this place. Ben was worried that he had me kidnapped. If only he knew.

Continued:

The door looked like the kind you just push open, so I pressed lightly and peered inside. It looked like a kitchen of some sort. There was a large stove with ten burners, a large fridge that looked like one you might find in a restaurant, a long counter, and a big island in the center surrounded by stools.

There was a lot of paper cups lying around with flat soda and beer in them. At the sight of the fridge, my stomach rumbled greedily, and I could not help but open it. I took out the milk cartoon and sniffed its contents. Nothing smelled funny, so I poured it

into a bowl I found in one of the cupboards up top. I got a box of cereal from the counter and took a seat on one of the stools.

It was not the best breakfast in the world, but it was the quietest. I needed it to stay that way until I found a way to get out.

‘You’re the new girl, right?’

Too late…

‘Um, yah’ I turned around to see a strawberry blond girl with a tank top and some pajama pants standing in the doorway. She went to the fridge and prepared herself a bowl of cereal

too. She took the seat across from me and started to eat.

‘You got here last night, right?’ she asked in between bites.

‘Yah, Dan brought me’ this girl did not seem to mean or anything but something about the people who lived here crept me out. The atmosphere here was filled with energy.

‘Dan huh? Was he a jerk?’ The question was random but appropriate at the same time.

‘Yup pretty much’ the girl began to laugh, and her laugh made me laugh too.

‘The names Adrianne’ she stuck out her hand and I gladly shook it.

I was beginning to like this Adrianne character.

‘Taylor,’ I said.

‘So, what is your ability?’ she asked me, scooping out the last of her cereal. I was surprised by the question, but I remembered- what Dan had told me, ‘There are others like you…’

‘I can turn invisible’ I confessed, getting up and putting my bowl in a sink that seemed a little small for such a big place.

‘Really? Wow! That’s fairly good.’ I smiled at Adrianne’s compliment. No one had ever said my ability was ‘good,’ back in the city if someone found out they called me a ‘freak’ or ‘devilish…’ Never had I been called ‘good.’

‘So, what’s your ability?’ I asked in return, going back to the stool, and watching Adrianne wash her bowl.

‘I can shapeshift,’ she said, and then suddenly, in the blink of an eye, she was Dan.

‘Wow!’ I said, hopping off my chair, ‘you could trick someone with that.’

Adrianne slash Dan smiled at me and I was amazed. Everything down to his smoked over bright blue eyes was copied. It was amazing.

‘Your ability is great too, I’m sure you liked to do pranks with that one’ Adrianne said, shifting back to her self again.

‘Well, you’re- kind of right. I tried not to use my ability too often, people didn’t, like it,’ I confessed, sitting back on the stool.

‘Well do not worry about them, you’re with us now. Go on! Show me your ability!’

I shut my eyes and concentrated. Finally, I felt the tingly feeling that came with turning invisible and I watched as Adrianne's face broke out into a wide smile. Her brown eyes were glimmering.

'That's amazing you like totally vanished,' I giggled and she jumped a little.

'Okay show yourself now…'

I went back to my regular self just as someone walked through the whitewashed doors. It seemed that people did not sleep too late in this big place, which was a surprise.

‘Hey Adri’ a deep voice hollered, coming around the table I noticed was a husky boy with brown hair and hazel eyes. He turned to me and nodded.

‘And who is this?’ he asked Adrianne, going to the counter, and pulling a granola bar out of a box.

‘This is Taylor, our newest member’ I knew I could not leave now; people were already calling me a member.

‘The names Sean, Taylor, it’s nice to meet you’ he said, leaning on the counter and chewing away.

‘Um, you too’ I murmured looking over at Adrianne.

‘Well, I’m going to go introduce Taylor to some other people, see yah later Sean!’ soon Adrianne was dragging me out of there and into the vast area of couches and party mess. ‘Thanks, it felt kind of awkward in there’ I said, rubbing my arm.

‘It’s ok, I know Sean could look intimidating sometimes but he’s a real softy.’

I followed Adrianne up the stairs and down the halls.

‘How old are you anyway?’ She asked, slowing down to keep pace with me.

‘Uh, fifteen’ I admitted feeling embarrassed.

‘I’m sixteen, trust me don’t worry about your age, the oldest person here is Merry-Kate and she’s nineteen. The youngest person is Blake and he is twelve. Sean is eighteen and Dan is sixteen like me’ Adrianne babbled on, making me feel a little better about my age.

I wondered how the Blake boy survived in a place like this.

I had met a lot of people in such a short amount of time that I have already forgotten the first one hundred names. On the outside, this town seemed small but, it was not. It had a colony of people living beneath its grounds. It was fun going on a tour with Adrianne. She was a very smart and funny girl who always made sure I was never left out of anything.

We finally circled back to my room and Adrianne turned to me with a wide grin.

‘My sources tell me that Dan is going to visit you today, ‘seeing the worried expression on my face she

continued quickly, ‘You don’t have to worry though! He’s just coming as orientation protocol.’

‘Orientation Protocol?’

‘He’ll explain it to you, don’t worry,’ I watched Adrianne stroll down the hall and then shuffle down the stairs. I felt vulnerable without her and quickly ducked into my room. I instantly recognized my two big and red suitcases. Strung across the dressers were most of my things and I even found stuff that I had left at home. How these people got them, I will never know.

Going over to the bathroom I found my toothbrush, hair things, fresh towel, washcloth, and even my fuzzy slippers and robe. Laughing a little to myself I rubbed the stain where my sister Janice dropped coffee on my robe and then tried to cover it up with nail polish that was the same color.

My eyes started to brim with tears. Even though it always seemed like my sisters hated me, there was a little part, a small fraction, that knew they loved me. I was their sister, there was no running away from that.

‘I can smell sadness on you,’ I nearly jumped out of my skin as I heard

the calm and collected voice of Dan. He was standing in the bathroom doorway, leaning on the doorframe, and staring off into space.

‘Damn it! Could you be any more- creepier!’ I said in surprise carefully wiping away my tears without smudging my eyeliner. I knew Dan could hear the wavering in my voice even though I was trying not to sniffle in front of him.

‘Why were you crying?’ He asked, folding his arms over his chest. I had no intention of spilling my guts to this guy so I took it easy.

‘I was just remembering something’ I answered, walking past him, and going into the room. The bathroom had suddenly gotten smaller.

‘Remembering what?’ He prodded, turning around to face me.

Straightforward much?

‘None of your business,’ I snapped, sitting on the edge of the bed Indian style. I played with a piece of thread on the sheet, hoping Dan would just get on with the Orientation.

‘Fine, I’ll do what I came here to do’ Dan said, with such poise that it scared me.

‘We are in district ten. There are exactly twenty districts in all the united states that make up an organization we like to call ‘The Colony.’ We recruit, train, and take care of people with what you could call ‘Special abilities.’ Anyone who was shunned by the outside world or just wants to learn to control what they can do can come to The Colony. We believe that all man’s rights should be equal no matter what that man can or cannot do. We fight for that belief and that belief only. I am Co-leader of District ten and Marry-Kate Douglas is Leader of District ten’ Dan stopped for a second,

probably to smell how I feel about all he just said.

What he smelled was ‘Overwhelmed.’

‘Your training is organized and formatted to your needs and ability. Each person is allowed a trainer and will partner with their trainer when it comes to combat and/or war’ I dropped my mouth wide open when he said war, I mean come on!

‘Training is every day at noon and school is something you do on your own time and your schedule. All your belongings from your previous home, except for furniture, will be brought to

you in a matter of time. You will be meeting with Merry-Kate to talk about your history and previous whereabouts, activities, and/or preferences' Dan stopped and took one deep breath.

'Any questions?' I was going to blow up with all the information I had to remember. And what did he mean to talk about the previous history? I could not tell these guys that I am charged with murder and have wanted papers posted all over the city.

'Well, I might have one-'

'No questions? Good… We're done here,' I glared at Dan's rude attitude and crossed my arms furiously.

‘You reek of anger, maybe you should spray on some happiness…’ with that Dan left and I just glared at him. He was worse than Ben.

Ben...

He was still wondering where I was. I did not want him to feel guilty like he lost me or something. I hoped he did not call the police cause if he did, I would never be able to leave this place. The police would find out that I am the wanted girl from the city and then I would be done.

I groaned and threw my face into my pillow.

I hoped that everything would go all right with Merry-Kate tomorrow.

When you hear the name Merry-Kate, you think of sweet, frilly, girly, cute, and cuddly. The Merry-Kate I stood before was none of the above. She was beautiful but call her ‘pretty’ and she just might snap your neck.

Tomboys paled in comparison. She is the definition of brute force.

‘Don’t just stand there, come in!’ Merry-Kate hollered. Adrianne had walked me to her office and gave me a good pep talk before heading back to her room. I was just standing in the doorway when Merry-Kate called me in.

I strolled into what I assumed was an office. There was a big oak desk in the middle. A large bookcase that mostly held a stereo, music, magazines, trinkets, and three books. There was a mini-fridge off to the side and two chairs in front of the big desk. The walls were painted a light green and had some posters on them. I stopped in front of the desk that had an intimidating Merry-Kate seated behind it.

Her chair was leaning back, and her feet were firmly propped on her desk. Her dark red hair was in a ponytail behind her and her three

piercing on each ear glimmered in the lamplight. Dan stood on her right by her desk as she sucked furiously on her red lollypop.

'What can I say? I'm nineteen,' Merry-Kate said, gesturing to her teen office and a glossy lollypop.

'Right' I murmured, glancing at Dan and then at my fingers.

'What is that supposed to mean?' Merry-Kate asked suddenly, leaning forward in her chair, and throwing her lollypop in the garbage.

'Nothing! Nothing, I was just-' Merry-Kate didn't let me finish.

‘Cool your Jets I’m just testing your nerves! Have a seat…’ Merry Kate took her feet off her desk and folded her hands over a binder on the table. She was ready for business.

Cautiously, I sat down, finding my feet more interesting than anything else in the room.

‘Geez, the kid would you at least look at me?’ I quickly jerked my head up into the direction of Merry-Kate, she nodded approvingly.

‘Now, you may have already heard of me around here. The name’s Merry-Kate, but you can just call me Merry. I do not take any backtalk, kiss

assign, or any other form of flattery. I stand by the belief and the belief only, which I'm sure Dan already explained to you,' I looked over at Dan who, as usual, was staring off into space. I mean where else can you look when you are blind?

'Okay, your history. You know why you're here right?' She asked, taking a piece of gum, and popping it in her mouth. 'Want to piece?'

'No thank you…'

'Fine…'

‘Yeah, I’m here to talk about my history,’ I said, answering her question.

‘So-o, you know why you are here, good for you. Now spill it!’ Merry leaned back in her chair and propped her feet up again. Her office had grown extremely silent as both she and Dan looked my way.

‘Um-mm,’ I was still unsure if I should be telling these people this.

‘Look kid I’m sure your life’s more interesting than that,’ Merry whined, snapping her gum and screwing up her face.

‘Yes but-’

‘Butt stinks!’ She said suddenly, making me jump in my seat.

I took a deep breath and then found myself spilling everything- ‘I used to go to a normal school, I used to have a normal family. I had five sisters and we all lived with my mom. My dad walked out on us and ever since then money was always tight. My abilities…. I always had them.

My mother said that when I was born the doctors went frantically looking for me and thought it was a miracle when I suddenly appeared in the basket again. Like I said, money

was tight and because of the advantages I got from my abilities I began to steal. Nobody would ever catch who was doing it on camera because well, I was invisible.'

I looked at Merry and Dan to see their take on all of this. Merry was now leaning both elbows on her desk, intrigued. Dan had pulled up a seat and leaned one elbow on Merry's desk.

'I was only twelve at the time and even though my mother knew how I was doing it, my sisters were suspicious. See my parents and I had never told them but they knew something was up. I continued to go to

regular school, but the kids started to realize, I was not normal. I was not the best at controlling my powers and the other kids caught on to what I was. They called me a ‘freak’… ‘devilish’… ‘sick’ ... they said- I should be handed over to the government, but my mother refused…’

I stopped to catch my breath before continuing. Here it goes, to tell them the truth.

‘Just three weeks ago, on a Thursday afternoon, I was doing homework at the dining room table. It was like any other regular day, my sisters were spending time together

with their friends outside and of course, I was alone. There was a knock at the door and since my mom had not been feeling good lately, I decided to answer it. I looked through the peephole and was surprised to see men dressed in all black with serious looks on their faces. I called mom anyway and she came to the door, also wondering who they could be. Finally, she opened the door and what they explained to her made both me and her terribly upset.'

I could tell Merry was fully engrossed in my life story. Dan just kept the same face that he had since I got here- jerk.

‘They said… They said that I had committed murder’… Merry’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline and Dan crossed his arms. I knew he was really interested but just did not want me to see it. Well good for you jerk cause it is working.

‘They said that I had killed a boy from my class name Bobby Shipparro. He lived down the street and often rode his bike every afternoon. They said that one afternoon Bobby went out and he did not come back. His mother had called the police and for one whole week they searched everywhere for Bobby.’

Merry’s eyes were glazed over, trying to imagine it all.

‘They found him all right. In the sewer,’ Merry cringed and Dan blinked.

‘And guess who they blamed?’ The room fell silent and Merry’s eyes seemed to beg for the answer.

‘Me,’ a small gasp escaped from Merry and finally Dan’s brows furrowed.

‘Taylor Lovett, we have a record that you have some special abilities’ they said, ‘We have had witnesses confirm that you can

disappear and reappear at will' they said, 'Taylor Lovett, you are under arrest for the murder of Bobby Shipparro' THEY SAID' my voice was starting to rise and I took a deep breath to calm down.

'What did they do?' Merry asked, speaking for the first in a long time.

'What did they do? They tried to arrest me, but my mother would not have it. She told them that I deserved a lawyer and a chance in court. The guys dressed in black finally left after negotiating with my mother and when the doors closed, she started to cry,' my

own eyes began to fill up with tears as I picked at my fingers.

‘I felt like a monster. If only I did not have this stupid ability my mother would not be kneeling on the floor crying. I ran upstairs and began to pack two large suitcases. I did not know where I was going but I knew I had to leave soon. I did not tell my mother; I did not tell my sisters and I told no friends where I was going. I had no friends' anyways’ a tear fell on my lap and I furiously wiped it away.

‘If I concentrate, I can make other things turn invisible too so sneaking out of the house wasn’t so

hard. I caught the next bus and rode it as far as it could go. That is how I ended up in this town,' I sniffled and looked up at Merry, 'I got a motel and was just starting to have a good relationship with this boy named Ben when mister mistereo over here decided to interrupt'

Dan let off two fake coughs into his fist.

'He brought me here and that's where it- ends,' I let out a big breath and closed my eyes for a second. Everything I had buried deep down in the nooks and crannies of my brain was resurfacing.

‘Taylor, I can tell you this’ Merry started, looking more serious than I had ever seen her, ‘Your story is by far the most heartbreaking one I’ve ever heard.’

She went to her desk and pulled out a green lollypop while spitting out her gum.

‘You have my respect’ she waved me away and opened her binder, scribbling things down that were to me. I got up quickly and made a mad dash for the door. I felt the tears coming and needed some alone time to cry like a baby. I tried to make a run for my room but who intercepted me?

Dan…

‘You smell- so depressed too’ he whispered, tucking his hands under his arms. I took two steps back and tried to think of a way around him. Why was he talking to me anyway?

‘When you should be grateful’ my mouth dropped open as

Dan said that and I was sure he was smelling ‘Shock…’

‘What?’

‘What I mean is that you're lucky you ran away before those equal rights hating jerks who tried to take you to prison. What I mean is that your

lucky I saved you from those think they can run some motel hillbillies who play with their guests,' I folded my arms and looked away from Dan's smoked over bright blue eyes. He could not see my head turn and eyes brimming with tears, but he could smell it.

'The Colony is your family now. The other family you left behind did not even like you. Didn't you say in there that your sisters began to dislike you just because you were different? A family who doesn't love you is overrated!' I could not believe what I was hearing. Was his heart made of stone?

‘How could you say that? My mother loved me and even though my sisters hated me deep down inside I knew… I knew they loved me! A family is not something you can replace, copy, or create. It is genuine! For you not to see that, for you…’

I was walking up to Dan now and I could feel the heat wavering off his body by now.

‘For you do not know that is… Is… Crazy!’ tears were streaming down my face now and I just couldn’t understand why I was so frustrated with Dan. I could have just walked away but something inside of me

wanted to convince him that family matters.

‘Stupid, that’s what it-,’ Dan did not get to finish because I tried to slap him but he caught my hand in midair. The force his big hand had on my little wrist hurt and I knew it would leave a bruise. His eyes held a mysterious yet determined look that I still had to figure out.

‘Call me crazy then Taylor because I don’t know what it’s like to have a family… a Genuine one.’

The only reasont he did not want me to see that lone tear slips down his face. When he released my

hand, I crumpled to the ground and stumbled to get back up. I wiped the stray tears from my face and rubbed my burning eyes. I needed the warm bed waiting in room ‘64.’

I needed that- and much more.

~*~

A knock on my door made me pry my sticky and wet eyes open. I wiped the crust away and peered at the clock on the nightstand next to me. Eleven twenty-eight. I had slept in.

I groaned- as I tried to sit up but the blood rushed to my ears and my temple started to pound. Holding my

head, I shoved the sheets off me but stopped noticing a blue and purple ring around my wrist.

Releasing my head, I lightly touched the bruise, grimacing as pain shot up my right arm. Dan was a jerk. I was shaken out of last night's memories when the knock came again, a little louder this time.

I wiped off the makeup that had streaked my face last night and stood to go answer the rapping door. It was more like hobbling since one of my legs had fallen asleep. I knew I would answer the door looking like a mess wearing my shorts and shirt from

yesterday, ruffled hair streaked makeup, and bruised wrist.

'Uh… Hello?' Sean questioned more than said as I answered my door. He looked me up and down and furrowed his brows.

'What do you want?' I grumbled, knowing I sounded rude but at that point did not care.

'Well, Adrianne was going to do this but she had to go to training early, so she asked me to escort you to the training grounds to meet your trainer' …Sean explained, looking at me funny and not at all paying attention to what he was saying.

‘But if you want to skip training today.’

‘I’ll be ready in fifteen minutes’ I closed the door and went straight to the bathroom after grabbing some clothes out of my drawer. I brushed out my hair, putting it into a ponytail, and washed my face, reapplying my makeup. I put on the tank top and stretch pants from my drawer and left the bathroom in search of shoes.

I found some comfortable running shoes and slipped those on.

After glancing in the mirror, I opened the door to a surprised Sean.

‘You clean up good’ was all he said as he led me down the hall and the stairs. We made a right at the last step and walked down the halls of the bottom rooms going all the way to the back wall. Surprisingly, there was an elevator there and after pressing the down arrow the metal doors swung open.

The elevator was big but again I was reminded of how big Sean was. Which again led me to wonder what his ability was.

‘Sean?’ I said, massaging my aching wrist. I tried to rotate it a bit, but it was starting to swell.

‘Yah?’ …He answered, whistling a tune that had no words.

‘What’s your ability?’ I asked, giving up with the wrist and putting my hand to my side. I began to wonder if I could make the swelling invisible. I did not want people to worry about me.

‘Interesting that you ask, but I’m afraid I can’t show you in here unless you want the elevator to break down,’ Sean threw a smile my way and I willingly shook my head ‘no.’

Whatever his ability was, it makes him able to break down one hundred-ton elevator.

The elevator dinged at our stop and the metal doors reeled open. Following close behind Sean, I walked into a vast area that I assume was the training grounds. It was a wide-open area, stretching as far as the eye could see, it seemed that that whole level was for training. The floor was a plush blue carpet and the walls had been painted a metallic grey. There were tons of black mats spread in rows on one side and the other held workout equipment of all kinds. There were water bottles and bags lined up all against the walls as people grunted and jabbed with their trainers.

I instantly began to wonder who my trainer was going to be. I hoped it was someone as nice as Adrianne. I could not handle any more intimidating colonials.

Sean led me past rows and rows of mats until finally, he stopped, telling me to wait by this vacant mat. He told me he was going to get my trainer who was on the other side working out. I stood Patiently waiting, concentrating on my wrist to see if I could make the swelling invisible. I was cut short as I notice Sean coming my way.

-And-

Who he had fallen close behind made my blood boil?

Dan…

Coincidence, I think not! My spirits dropped, and I could tell Sean noticed the tension too. I do not know if I have a distinctive ‘smell’ but as he got closer to me Dan’s eyes went wide as if he knew who his student was.

My face was flushed as Sean introduced me to the jerk I already knew.

‘No need for invitations Sean, I already know him’ I gave up on my wrist and said bye to a confused Sean.

‘Look, I understand things didn’t go so-o well last night but I’m your trainer now and you need to treat me with respect’

‘Why’d Merry pick you?’ I could not help but ask, glaring up at him.

‘So much for the respect,’ he murmured, getting down on the mat and starting to stretch. I followed. ‘She picked me because I’m blind’

‘And?’

‘Your ability is invisibility since I’m blind, I can’t see you anyway which makes it more challenging for you

because I’m used to fighting people without seeing them’

I looked down at my swollen wrist and understood. Somehow Dan was able to block my hit even though he could not see me. I did not want to talk to Dan but there was something I needed to ask him.

‘How did you do it?’

‘Do what?’

‘Block my hit.’

Dan was silent for a moment as we stretched our hamstrings, ‘well I could sense your hand coming at me. All my sensoria are advanced except for

my sight. I can also smell people's emotions.

I nodded but then said ok aloud, remembering he could not see.

'What do you smell on me right now?' I asked, getting up as Dan stood.

'Well it's kind of hard to find in such a big crowd but your smell is kind of …unique,' I wrinkled my brow on this discovery, I had a unique smell?

'Confusion,' he said finally handing me some gloves that let my fingers point through but protected my knuckles and palms, 'You've been

smelling like confusion ever since you got here.'

'Well your right, I am confused' I said, hitting Dan's open hands like he instructed, 'This whole place confuses me, Merry-Kate confuses me, my life confuses me, you… confuse me.'

I looked up at Dan to see him staring off into space. It was hard reading his face since he often left it blank.

'I confuse you?' He asked, signaling for me to punch harder.

'Well, yes. But it is nothing, I mean I do not want to talk about it'

when your training you end up speaking your mind, and at once I felt like I was babbling.

‘Whatever,’ Dan replied bluntly, keeping his hands steady as I punched away. Only lightly punching when it came to my right hand. I was so mad at his attitude though.

‘Jerk!’ I grunted, hitting hard with my left hand. Dan’s foot moved a centimeter backward from the punch, he raised one eyebrow.

‘Excuse me?’

-And-

‘Don’t act like you didn’t hear me, you’re a jerk and everybody knows it. You put on this hardcore shell and then verbally attack everyone. Do you even have any friends? I would be surprised if you do. You make me so frustrated you know that? Why do you have to be so rude all the time? You seriously need an attitude check!’

I hit Dan’s open hand as hard as I could and was surprised as he stumbled backward. Before I could even congratulate myself through a stream of pain traveled up my right arm making me collapse to my knees.

‘Oww,’ I moaned, clutching my wrist that was beginning to throb, my eyes were beginning to water but I did not dare cry. I tried to get back up and shake it off before Dan noticed but it was too late.

‘Taylor…?’ Dan called, kneeling next to me, and trying to read my emotions.

‘Why do you smell like ‘pain.’

…?...

He asked, looking in my direction.

I squeezed my eyes shut and then opened them again, ‘It’s nothing

it’s just-’ I could not finish because a wave of pain overcame my wrist again.

It hurt so bad!

‘Just what?’

‘You jolted up my wrist that’s what!’ I snapped, standing up and walking past rows and rows of mats. I needed to take the elevator out of here and to my room, so I can get some ice.

‘Taylor! Taylor waits…!’ Dan called, jogging after me. I ran onward, reaching the elevator and frantically clicking the up button.

‘Taylor!’ Dan called, weaving around mats with scary accuracy.

‘Leave me alone!’ I yelled, making heads turn. Ignoring the stares, I boarded the elevator, clutching my wrist and praying for it to stop throbbing. The doors to the elevator started to close shut but were stopped by a gloved hand.

I cursed under my breath as Dan stepped inside, sweating at the brow, and looking in my direction. It still feels weird to me how he does not look you in the eye when he talks.

‘What’s wrong with your wrist?’ He asked, panting, and wiping his forehead. He had to concentrate a lot just to catch up with me. I slid to the

corner of the elevator and knelt in a sitting position.

Standing suddenly felt too hard.

‘It’s bruised and swelling bad-’ I said finally, giving up on the ‘Get the hell away from me!’ charade. Dan came over to me and helped me to my feet.

‘It’s because of last night, isn’t it?’ He asked, touching my wrist lightly and jerking his hand away when I cringed.

‘Yah,’ I whispered, trying my best to stay up, I felt faint and weak. Dan held my shoulder firmly while

grasping my left arm. The elevator finally dinged and we sped out unto the bottom floor.

We started to walk towards the stairs but I could not do it. I just could not.

‘Whoa, Taylor, why can’t you stand up?’ Dan asked, steadying my shoulder, and helping me along.

‘I don’t know’ I confessed, talking barely above a whisper, Dan put his hand to my forehead and sighed.

‘You're burning up bad, it’s probably a fever’ before I knew it, Dan

was placing his hand under my knee and lifting me into his arms.

‘Dan… put me down’ I murmured, clutching my head, and resting my wrist on my stomach.

‘I’m afraid you might faint if I do that’

‘But… but…’

‘But what?’

‘But what will people think if they see us?’ I whispered, looking up at a focused Dan. We were already up the stairs and walking to my room.

‘Your health is more important than what people think’ Dan answered,

opening my door, and carrying me in sideways. It reminded me of the groom carrying the bride home.

‘I guess you’re not a jerk after all…’

Dan smiled.

‘Where am I?’ looking through the haze that had become my vision I saw a figure sitting on my right side.

I tried to sit up but felt pain and heaviness overcome me. A firm but gentle hand eased me back down into a laying position. My vision was coming back a little and I could vaguely see what I assume is my room. ‘You’re in

your room’ came a voice that seemed to belong to the figure. I recognized him as Dan. I cleared my throat as I tried to talk some more. Talking had become hard and my throat felt hoarse.

‘Because…’

‘Because you fainted remember? You have a really bad fever and yours… the wrist isn’t looking too good’ Dan sounded tired and I wondered what time it was. In hopes of seeing my clock I looked to my left coming face to face with tubes, wires, and cords all hooked up to my left wrist. A big metal stand with a fluid bag was hooked up to it.

I lifted my right arm to scratch my hair when I realized my right hand was securely bandaged. What happened while I was asleep?

‘I’m so stupid,’ I turned my head to where Dan was sitting, he was staring at the wall and looking guilty.

‘Why? Being blind doesn’t make you see and stay.’

‘No not that. Trust me I have already gone through the ‘I hate being blind!’ stage. I am talking about your wrist. I was so stupid to have been so rough on you. I should have just let you slap me in the face. I mean it wouldn’t

have even left a mark on me' I didn't know how to take that comment.

'But you... 'Dan slid his hand along my arm, trying to find my right wrist. I was surprised at how much I liked the feel of his fingers on me, 'I hurt you badly and how could I fight for the colony's belief if I'm taking advantage of my strength?'

Dan finally found my wrist and laid it in his big hands. I did not have to have the ability to smell emotions to know how Dan was feeling.

'Dan-' there was a knock at my door making Dan gently put my wrist back on the bed.

Dan opened the door to a skinny little girl with black pigtails. She scuttled inside, smashing a white clipboard into her chest. Dan mumbled a couple of words to her; the girl glanced at me and then came scurrying to my side. She reminded me of a field mouse.

The scrawny girl pushed her red-rimmed glasses further unto her head and she emitted down one of her jet- black pigtails. Her tanned skin gave me a clue to her being Spanish. She set the clipboard on the dresser and started to check the fluid in the sack

hanging on the metal pole by my bedside.

I watched with confusion as she picked up my unharmed wrist, holding it in a way and looking down at her watch at the same time. She did a little nod of her head, picking up her clipboard and scribbling something down.

‘Excuse me but what are-’ the girl cut me off with a fierce ‘shush!’

I sighed as she picked up my wrist again and began to adjust the needles that were inserted into it. Finally, she took a vile full of who

knows what and inserted it into the tube connected to my left wrist.

Whatever it was, it made me feel drowsy.

‘Now,’ began the girl, talking for the first time, ‘when she dozes off, she’ll probably sleep for a good ten hours and that should get you the rest you deserve to Mr. Harbor.’

The girl seemed to be talking to Dan and I made a mental note of Dan’s last name.

Harbor…

‘Alexandra, you don’t have to call me Mr. Harbor, Dan is fine to

remember?’ Dan said bluntly as if he had been telling the little girl this all her life.

‘And I keep telling you don’t call me Alexandra, Alex is fine’ the girl retorted, pushing up her glasses and scribbling one last note on her clipboard.

‘Yah, yah whatever,’ he said, crossing his arms in that defiant way.

Part: 30

‘Well, I’ll be going now. Call me if she has any more complications’ then the girl was scurrying out of the room going to who knows where.

‘Who was that?’ I whispered, suddenly feeling very drowsy.

‘Oh, that was Taylor an- I mean Taylor. She is a thirteen-year-old girl packed with a lot of attitudes’ Dan answered, sounding tired himself.

‘What’s her ability?’

‘She’s a child prodigy. A genius if you will? She’s the only person around here who’s medically capable of taking care of us.’

‘Oh…?’

I was about to ask Dan something else when someone- bursts

through the room door. Talk about no privacy.

‘Dan we need you ASAP! Someone’s fooling around in the decoy run-down shack!’ Like- so that is what that dingy shack was called. The intruder was a short Asian guy who spent many hours in the gym.

‘Are you sure it isn’t just a forest creature?’ Dan was standing now, looking more alert than ever.

‘We’re certain sir, definitely human’ the Asian man answered, he looked about ready to fight.

Dan sighed, rubbing his eyes, and then looking up at the ceiling. He took one deep breath through his nose and then exhaled loudly. Then just as my eyes drooped to a heavy close….

‘Ben…’ Dan whispered before I heard the thudding of retreating footsteps.

Walking down the hall I heard voices. Not only regular talking but harsh whispers that seemed to be about something incredibly important. Going invisible, I went up to Merry-Kate’s cracked door. I was supposed to be recuperating but that was going to have to wait.

‘Are you sure you left no tracks, Dan?’ Merry-Kate whispered fiercely, pacing back and forth.

‘I’m positive! You know I don’t leave an obvious trail Merry-Kate!’ he answered, looking more stressed than I had ever seen him before. From what I could see, there was someone else sitting in one of the chairs that faced Merry’s desk. The chair had ropes laced around it.

‘I can hear you guys, you know!’ then came another annoying voice. It sounded famed, like…

‘Shut up Ben!’ Dan said suddenly.

Ben!

‘Dan what are we going to do with him now?! He has no abilities!’ Merry said frantically, sounding more worried than her usual self, ‘If the other districts find out he’s here we are done for!’

‘Well first, Taylor, come in and stop eavesdropping’ Dan said, looking my way. If I were visible, they would have seen my face deepen three shades redder. I eased open the door and made myself visible as I stepped into the tension-filled room.

‘Second, we need to find out exactly what he knows’ Dan finished,

waving me to a seat. I walked over to a chair, as Ben kept his eyes on me.

‘Taylor?’ he asked, squinting and un-squinting his eyes.

‘In the flesh,’ I mumbled, playing with a piece of my hair.

‘What were you doing up their Ben?’ Dan asked, making Ben turn to him, ‘Why were you snooping around out there!’

‘I was just walking around ok?! I saw the shack and was wondering if I could probably fix it up for my personal uses when you people showed up…!’

Ben sounded like he was telling the truth, but Dan slit his eyes.

‘You were looking for Taylor, weren’t you?’ He said, getting in Ben’s face.

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about!’ Ben looked away from us all and sighed deeply. ‘I knew you were a freak Dan’ he mumbled.

Dan moved so fast that all I felt was a breeze. His hands were at Ben’s throat now, squeezing but not causing damage.

Part: 31

‘What did you say?’ He said through clenched teeth and I could not watch any further.

‘Hey! Let him go, Dan!’ I grabbed Dan’s arm and pulled it away from Ben’s neck. Ben let out two raspy coughs.

‘Didn’t you hear what he just called me?!’ Dan asked furiously, I was not expecting Dan to just walk out of the room like that.

‘Well, that went well,’ Merry-Kate said sarcastically, clapping her hands together. Going around the side of her desk she took a dramatic seat in her chair.

‘What am I supposed to do with Ben?’ I asked, regretting ever eavesdropping.

‘Bring him to the containment room’ Merry-Kate decided, placing a CD in her stereo.

‘Where’s that?’

‘Down the hall… I am sorry Taylor but it seems he is your responsibility now. Dan wants nothing to do with him’ I sighed, releasing

Ben from the chair and giving him an apologetic look as I tied his hands.

Walking out of Merry's room as pop music blared, I tried not to make eye contact with Ben, but that was proving to be difficult.

'I thought you ran away,' he said finally, as we reached a room marked 'containment room.' I did not know how to respond to that so I took him in and began to untie him.

'Aren't you going to say something?' He asked, rubbing his wrists, and looking at me. I made the mistake of looking up at Ben. He looked genuinely confused but I did not know what to say to him. Ever since Dan brought me to this place I had never

really sat down and thought of Ben finding me… but now he had.

‘I don’t have anything to say-’ I confessed, taking the rope, and heading for the door.

‘Of course, you don’t.’

I did not know exactly what Ben meant by that, but it made me feel like- I had done or said something wrong.

Closing the metal door, I turned the lock and watched through the foggy mirror as Ben took a seat on a metal chair. I thought I would never see him again…

Part: 32

But there he was.

I did not know where I was going as I walked the halls. I was looking for Adrianne’s room, or you could say I wanted to say hi to Sean, but to tell you the truth I was looking for Dan. He looked mad earlier and I did not want his fierce attitude to get in the way of my training … or you could say I wanted to make sure he was ok.

I bumped into Taylor though and after hearing her scold me about walking around when I should be resting, she told me where his room was. So, on I went to find Dan’s room

which I was told to be number ‘94,’ climbing the stairs to the top floor- I finally stood facing a door identical to mine just with a different number.

It was so silent that I assumed nobody was even in there but after mustering up enough courage, I knocked.

‘Who is it?’ Called, Dan and I hesitated- before answering.

‘It’s me… Taylor’ if there were ever a time, I wanted to go invisible, that was one of those times.

‘What do you want?’ Dan opened the door now and again I was met by smoked over bright blue eyes.

‘I want to talk,’ I said, trying to rub the sweat on my palms away.

‘About Ben huh?’ He asked, opening the door a little wider now.

‘Yah,’ after a moment of silence, Dan opened the door all the way and motioned for me to follow him inside. I do not know what I was expecting to see in Dan’s room. I do not if I was expecting to see the same furniture as mine or some cool fighting gear. I did not know what to expect.

But what I saw was, something- I did not expect.

Flashlights. Thousands and thousands of flashlights. All hanging from the ceiling, pasted to the wall, sitting on the dresser, everywhere. Yet still, they were all turned off.

‘Dan?’ I started, trying to find my words, ‘What are all these flashlights for?’

‘They were just a phase,’ he said, going over to his bed and taking a seat on the edge. Dodging hanging flashlights and glancing at random objects, I finally made it to Dan’s bed and took a hesitant seat.

‘That’s it? That’s all your willing to say about them?’ I pushed, gesturing to thousands of flashlights that stared back with their lifeless bulbs.

Part: 33

‘As I said, they were a phase. When I first became blind everything was so dark. I just wanted to finally understand something clearly at last again and I thought that if I bought a whole bunch of flashlights… I would. Of course, I grew out of that stage and now they just sit around lifeless. Any more questions you came to hammer me with?’

‘Oh… Why do you hate Ben so much?’ I asked, clasping my hands together. Dan rubbed his eyelids and sighed.

‘Is that really what you came to talk about?’ He asked.

‘Well… Yah’

‘Well I and Ben used to be friends,’ I think something of a gasp escaped my lips as Dan said this. I would have never expected them to be friends. When Dan looked at Ben all I saw was hate in his eyes.

‘Yup… friends, but he had his way of thanking me when I saved him

from that bus that almost ran him over. He found out I had abilities and decided I was a ‘freak’ I sighed, realizing what truly happened.’

‘I’m sorry that happened?’

‘Well it wasn’t your fault, so you don’t have to be sorry-’ Dan shrugged, looking in my direction. It still amazed me how much more skilled he was then me even though I can see.’

‘Dan, does it ever bother you that you don’t know what people look like?’ I asked. Dean scrunched his eyebrows together and placed his hand on his chin.’

‘It used to… But I have other ways of imagining what people look like’

Part: 34

I looked over at Dan and took the time to look at him. His jet-black hair was cut in a neat sleek way making his hair streamline.

His misted over light blue eyes that was mystical pools of magic. There was just something so enchanting about him in the glow of the lamp that I did not even notice that I was staring at him.

‘Do I have something on my face?’ Dan noticed that I was staring at him because I turned ruby red at his question.

‘Uh- No sorry I just thought I saw something’ I lied, playing with my fingers. Suddenly though, Dan was lifting his fingers like he did that night when I first saw him, and he began searching my face. It was not as weird as I thought it would be, but it gave me chills to feel Lane’s warm but firm hands caressing the curves and dimples in my face.

‘Why are you nervous?’ He asked smirking under his breath. My

mind froze as the room grew silent, Dan’s face growing closer to mine.

I was surprised as Adrianne came flying in, cheeks flushed without warning.

‘Dan! What are you doing here! Didn’t you hear?! The anti mutation shots have been released!’ Dan jumped up so fast that I was sure he was going to knock down one of his flashlights and me as well.

‘It can’t be! But the treaty-’ Adrianne cut him off quicker than he could finish.

‘If there ever was a treaty there isn’t one now! Hurry! Merry-Kate needs you!’ Adrianne ran over to Dan and grabbed him by the wrist dragging him out the door in such a hurry, I do not even think she noticed me. I watched the door slam shut and I let out a sigh, my face returning to its normal color. Whatever was about to happen, it did nott and I do not know if I should be happy or sad about it.

‘We’ll have to finish our talk later.’

‘So, you finally come back,’ Ben sighed, getting up from his chair as I opened the metal door. I had come to

bring him some food and I set the tray down, turning to leave.

Part: 35

‘What? You’re just going to leave?’ Prodded Ben... I turned around slowly and just stared.

‘Oh, I see. They turned you into one of them so now you can’t talk to me,’ I marched across that room so fast I surprised myself.

‘I was born with my abilities and being one of them isn’t so bad!’ I was up in his face now, our chest barely touching.

‘Is that so? Seems more like freaksville to me’ I hissed pushing Ben only to bump my chest into him again.

‘I am not a freak and I can’t believe you would say that!’

‘I know you’re not…’

‘What did you just say-! Wait…. What?’ I did not know if I had heard right. It had come as just a bare whisper and I did not even realize he had said it.

‘I said I know you’re not a freak’ He whispered, staring down at me, looking deep within my eyes. I

froze, my breath coming out in short rasps.

‘Then what am I?’ I asked quietly, looking at every detail on his face.

‘Your-’ I twirled around quickly as Dan entered the room and stumbled backward as I realized how to close me, and Ben was standing. Dan was nott looking directly at us, I mean he cannot look at us, but I could tell he knew what was up.

‘Is everything ok in here? I heard yelling’ he crossed his arms in that defiant way and I sighed.

‘Nothing… it’s nothing,’ I whispered, stepping over the tray and quickly squeezing past Dan. I slipped out the door and let out a whoosh of air as I turned the corner down the hall. That was just too awkward. Going the rest of the way to my room I went invisible not wanting to engage in conversation with anybody.

I went to my room and closed the door behind me, flinging myself onto my bed. Having Ben here was going to make ‘Glad you could make it Taylor!’ Adrianne yelled over the pounding music. I was at one of the colonies' annual Saturday night parties

and I honestly had no idea why I came. It was just a party that was being held on the bottom floor, like how I had found everyone hanging out when I first came to the colony. Even when I went to school, I was not much of a party person. I was not much of a people person to even get invited to a party for that matter.

Yet there I was. The music pounding, people gathered in small groups across the plush blue carpet. Beers, wine, and I'm-sure-it's-not punch littering each hand and the floor. It felt like a high school party, and I was a part of it.

‘Yah! Glad you finally broke out of that shell you call a room!’ Sean practically had to holler, and I punched him lightly on the arm. We laughed but it could hardly be heard over Paramore.

‘I’m going to get some of whatever she’s having’ Adriane said, pointing at some girl who was using her fire to make swirls of flaring fire breath curl in the air. She had gathered a crowd and they were all rooting for her. I watched my strawberry blond friend head for the kitchen and Sean followed. I was tempted to go to but I thought the best of it.

I had noticed the way Sean had been looking at Adriane all night and it seems like he likes her. Whatever little moments they can get together should not be intruded on by me. Even though I was being a good friend I felt lonely in that big crowd with people bumping against me and grinding on each other. I felt out of place… until someone tapped me on the shoulder.

I was half expecting it to be Adriane, half hoping it was Dan but I had turned around to a completely new face.

Well not entirely new because it had seemed like I was introduced to

this guy before, but I could not remember his name. He was tall, had brown hair that fell in his face a little, and his eyes! That boy had eyes! Those were the first things that struck me as I looked into those hazel eyes with gold flecks.

The boy smiled sheepishly and scratched the back of his head.

'I saw you across the way… and I just wanted to know if you want to dance,' the boy stuck out his hand and I took it with a smile. He pulled us out into a better dancing spot and soon I was doing dance moves I did not even know I could do.

‘What’s your name?’ I had to ask three times over the music before the boy could hear me.

‘Noah!’ He shouted, coming closer to me so that his lips brushed my ear.

‘Taylor!’ I shouted back, grasping his shoulder. I was surprised at the DJ decided at that moment to switch to a slow song but I was grateful for my ears to have a break.

‘So, what’s your ability?’ Noah asked, grabbing my waist, and pulling me into him. He did a little drum beat as I talked.

‘I can turn invisible, you?’ He gave me a charming smile as I wrapped my arms around his neck.

‘It’s pretty lame but I can shoot lasers from my eyes’ I smiled reassuringly.

‘That’s pretty cool actually, better than mine.’

‘Hey at least yours doesn’t give you headaches twenty-four-seven,’ I shrugged, giving up on our little banter.

‘Your cute when you do that’ Noah whispered and a warm tingle start from my toes and work its way up.

It was natural for me to blush at a compliment like that but it felt different from Noah. With Dan, he could not see me blush but Noah saw everything. It made him chuckle and I turn invisible.

'Ah come on, I'm sorry,' he cooed, holding me tighter as if to make sure I was there.

'I'm sorry it was just a reflex,' I said, going back to normal.

'Keep that up and you'll make me look like I'm dancing with myself'

I laughed, 'You would have kept dancing, though right?'

‘Of course, but I need you to stay visible or else- I wouldn’t be able to do this…’

Before- I knew it, Noah was kissing me. I mean full-on kissing me. He pulled me into him closer and I was into it more than I thought I would. But there was something off. Something that did not seem right. As I had my eyes closed, Noah’s warm lips sliding over mine, I was not picturing myself standing in the middle of the floor with him.

No, in my head I was with Dan.

I pulled away from Noah suddenly at this realization and he gave me a quizzical look.

'It's been a long time but I know I'm not that bad of a kisser' he chuckled, steadying my elbow as I almost fell on someone.

'No- it isn't you, it's me' I said quickly, staring up into his gold-flecked eyes. There was something I liked about Noah… But he was not Dan…

Or Ben…

Taylor leaned in and Kissed me lightly this time and I just smiled.

‘You want me to walk you to your room, you seem like you need an early night’ I nodded my head in a fog. Had I just pictured myself kissing Dan?

Taylor intertwined his fingers with mine and slightly rubbed the back of my knuckles as we walked past the crowd of people. He was being sweet and I felt bad for thinking about someone else while I was kissing him.

We passed by Sean and Adrianne who were whispering something in each other’s ears. Adrianne gave me a thumbs up and a wink and I smiled back. Walking up the stairs it was dark and quiet, it seemed

like everyone was down at that party. We finally made it to my room door and I turned to Taylor with a sigh.

'Sorry about earlier' I said, hoping another apology would have some effect.

'No worries Taylor, I had a wonderful time. I'll see you tomorrow?' It was more of a statement than a question as Taylor bent down and kissed me lightly on the lips again.

'Yah, tomorrow' I turned around and opened my room door saying another bye to Taylor and then closing my door with a thud. What a night!

I had a wonderful time… but I felt weird not seeing Dan the entire day. my days long and tiring.

We were bouncing along a dirt-packed road in Dan's jeep, the trees scattering shadows across our faces. I was in a car… alone with Dan. It was not how I had dreamed it to feel though because we were not on our way to a date or anything. No, this ride was all business.

Dan's face showed that.

I had tried to start a conversation the whole time, but all Dan would do Is grunt in reply and it was starting to piss me off. We were on

our way to the city, a place I had never expected to set foot in again. We are going to get more information on what people around the colony are calling ‘The Death Shots.’ The shots do nott kill you, but they make you normal and to people in the colony it is a death threat.

I do not know how I feel about the shots yet. All my life there was a small part of me that wished to be normal, but then there was the other part that was proud of who I am. Coming to the colony had fueled that pride and made me feel more at home than ever?

I looked over at Dan to see if his facial expression had changed... it had not.

'Dan, please talk' I do not know where the pleading came from, but it worked.

'They released Ben last night,' he murmured, swerving around a pothole. I turned so that I was not looking at the dashboard but at him.

'What?'

'They released Ben last night' he repeated, more slowly this time. I did not know how to feel about that

statement. I did not even get to tell Ben bye.

‘Oh,’ was all I had to say as I rested my elbow on the car door, smashing my cheek into my palm.

‘You wouldn’t mind though since you already have a boyfriend’

I looked at Dan funny even though he could not see me. What did he just say?

‘You heard me’ he said, sensing my confusion. I breathed in and took a deep breath out.

‘Dan, do you mean Taylor?’ I asked, twisting my body so that I was fully facing him. Dan frowned.

‘Maybe’

‘And how would you know about Taylor?’ Um good, I had him where- I wanted him.

‘Things never stay a secret in the colony Taylor,’ was all he had to say about it. I sighed, was Dan… Jealous. But he did not like me, did he?

‘Are you Jealous Dan?’ I asked, knowing he heard the smile in my voice. Dan turned a shade of pink beneath his cheeks.

‘Who said?’ I laughed, and this surprised him a bit. ‘What? What’s so funny?’

‘It’s just… it’s just I’ve never seen you blush before; we should have talks like this more often’ I mused, slapping his knee, he shook his head with a smirk.

‘We'll celebrate because it won’t be happening often’… and just like that, the blush was gone.

‘Look, Dan, I don’t know why I’m explaining this to you but Taylor was kind of, the umm… the heat of the moment if you know what I mean’ oh

jeez now a blush was creeping unto my face!

Dan looked over at me, but then faced the road again. It is still weird driving with him, I know he will not crash but it makes me nervous. ‘Heat of the moment huh?’ He asked, his teeth flashing white in the sunlight that made it through the trees.

‘Yah, is that too hard to believe?’ I asked, glad the road had turned to asphalt. We were nearing the city.

‘I wouldn’t know’ there was a mystery in Dan’s words, but I took them anyway. There was still a lot I did

not know about him, but it did not bother me too much. My stomach tightened up as a sign flew by, saying the city was only ten miles away. I grabbed the car door frame and clutched my middle. When Dan had chosen me to come with him out of all the other colonists, I was hesitant. But then I thought, going into the city with Dan could be fun. Now I am having a second thought.

Suddenly- Dan’s broad hands were reaching over and Imitating me on the knee, his hand resting there for a second longer. ‘Don’t worry Taylor, maybe people have forgotten by now.’

You have just witnessed the magic of Dan, which can make a girl feel better by a tap on the knee and words money could not buy.

‘Thanks, Dan-’

I and Dan were sharing a hotel.

I was in the bathroom, hyperventilating with a paper bag. Not necessarily about the whole Dan thing. No, I am just overreacting even though I am in the city that could arrest me for murder. I sat on the toilet seat trying to catch my breath, Dan’s magic words only lasted until the sign saying ‘Welcome to The City!’

Using the counter as a boost I forced myself to stand up. Looking in the mirror, I looked pale with a tinge of green. I just hoped I would nott vomit in front of Dan.

‘Taylor! Are you all right!?’ Dan called from outside. I had been in there an hour.

‘I’m fine, coming out now’ I put the paper bag under the sink and fixed my hair before opening the door. Dan gave me a quizzical stare before going to the bathroom. I looked around the simple hotel. Two beds, a nightstand in between, a mini-fridge, a small table

and two chairs, closets, etc. It was a very bland place, nothing special.

I took the bed closest to the bathroom in case of an… emergency. I laid back on the bed and thought about everything in general. I was in a hotel room, along with a ridiculously cute boy, and I was near the point of vomiting.

Of course, the relationship between me and Dan was strictly business for this trip. At least that is what I think. I just wish I could read Dan. I wish I knew what he was thinking, he seems so closed off

sometimes that it is hard to talk to him much less read him.

Dan came out of the bathroom and went over to his bedside, taking stuff out of his pocket and putting them in the draws by the nightstand. I just watched silently, knowing that just a couple of months ago my mother would have never allowed me to be alone with a boy in a hotel room.

'We scout tomorrow,' was all Dan said before brushing his teeth and going to bed. He just slept in some shorts and it made me nervous seeing him shirtless. The man did that boy have abdominal muscles! I got ready to

go to bed too and it made me giggle when I thought of this as a sleepover. The silly things that run around in my head.

I tucked myself in and turned so that I was facing Dan's bed. He did not even sleep under the covers and I could see the rise and fall of his chest. His face looked so peaceful when he was not scrunching it up into a frown.

Oops! I jinxed it…. He just made a frown in his sleep.

I am standing on a vast white plane. Nothing but nothingness stretching out before me. Wait… what is that? It sounds like squeaking, the

squeaking of wheels. I turn my head just slightly and let a gasp escape my breath at what I see. Slowly, very slowly, as if his wheels are rusted over, Bobby Shipparro rides by on his bike. He is as pale as a ghost, his eyes caressing dark circles, a black crimson red hole where his heart should be….

I fall to my knees, only a whimper escaping my throat and Bobby turns to me. His lips are cracked white and peeling and I see him mouth the words ‘Murderer.’ I try to scream out ‘NO!’ but no words leave my lips. I clasp my throat, forcing it to work. Then Bobby begins to dissolve right in

front of my eyes, melting like the wicked witch and suddenly there is a drain in the whiteness. Bobby's liquid form slips into that drain never to be seen again. I crawl furiously towards the drain, trying to pull him back out, but he is gone, gone to the sewers.

Portion

I look up and I am shocked to see my living room. Everything, from the rickety old table I did my homework at, to the blood-red door my mother answered that fateful day. I amm surprised to see the door open, slowly at first and they stand before me, the two men in black and they are pointing

straight at me. I hear my mother's sobs. I cannot see her, I cannot feel her, but I hear her sobs racking my brain. No matter how hard I cover my ears, I can still hear them.

She hates me, she was always disappointed in me and I do not deserve to be her daughter.

~*~

I shot straight up in bed and was surprised to feel my body collide straight into Dan's. Feeling his skin in contact with mine, me only wearing a tank top, made a wave of shock surge through me. Dan held my arms steady;

I had not even realized they were shaking and began to rub them slowly.

'Taylor… Taylor are you all right? You were murmuring and thrashing in your sleep' he said, wiping the sweat from my forehead and brushing away the hair that clung to my face.

'I'm- I'm…' I did not know how to explain everything I had dreamed. I had had similar dreams before but none this vivid and detailed. Coming to the city had shocked some nerve in my brain forcing these nightmares on me. I did not want them.

I began to cry.

It was the first time- I had sobbed in front of Dan. Yeah, I cried that time when we fought in the hallway but this time I was sobbing. Dan was shocked too because he just pulled me into his chest and let me wash him with my tears. It was an all-out Niagara Falls.

'Taylor, it's okay… I'm here… sh-h' it was weird hearing Dan whisper those comforting words into my ear and I think that's what made me stop crying. Or it was the fact that I could feel every flex and muscle from Dan pressed against me.

I sniffled, ‘I- I had a bad dream,’ When the words left my mouth, I then realized how babyish they sounded.

‘About?’… Dan whispered, he sounded tired and it made me feel like I was a burden suddenly. Dan had chosen me to come with him and now he had to wake up in the middle of the night to comfort me like some baby.

‘It’s- It’s nothing, I’m fine… Go back to bed, get some rest, you don’t have to-’ Dan cut me off with a deep sigh.

‘Taylor, why do you always feel that I don’t want to listen to what you

have to say?' Dan asked, his eyes looking into my eyes for the first time. It almost made me forget he was blind. I was too dumbstruck by his question to answer.

'Well I do'… he said, since I could not answer him now, 'Tell me about your dream.'

So-o I did and the words came spewing out just as the tears had. Dan frowned at some parts, most parts, but he did not talk. He let me do all the yappings and it felt good to be able to tell someone all of this.

‘It’s my fault,’ he concluded finally after I was done talking and we just stared at each other.

‘No, it’s not…’ I said quickly, wiping my nose with the back of my hand.

‘Yes, it is, I should have never brought you back here, you’ve already gone through enough and now I’m bringing you back to the people who want to through you in jail.’

I laid my hand on Dan’s chest, feeling his heart pulsating beneath my fingers. It sent a wave of warmth up my arm. Dan looked my way anxiously, waiting for me to say something.

‘Even though I still do nott think it is your fault, I forgive you. If it makes you feel better, I forgive you’ Dan smiled and I loved how it looked on him. It was not a frown, it was not a smirk, it was a genuine smile.

Genuine…

I started to laugh, and Dan scrunched up his eyebrows and looked my way as if to say, ‘Are you crazy?’

‘I’m sorry, it’s just… Looks at me!’ I giggled and began to laugh harder realizing Dan could not look at me. But then it made me feel sad and guilty for laughing at him being blind. I was just an emotional wreck!

‘I wish I could see you’ he said, his big hand caressing my cheek and his thumb running along with my eyebrows, the length of my nose, my lips that let out silent gasps of air. My heart racing.

‘Why are you so nervous?’ He whispered, just like that time I came to talk to him.

Then Dan leaned in, smoothly and silently as if she were on a forbidden mission, and he kissed me. The passion, the lust, his warm lips sliding back and forth, back, and forth, back, and forth.

Dan…

He was everything at that moment. Everything- I ever wanted, everything I ever hoped for, more than I could have imagined. It was Dan… And I wanted him to be mine.

I grabbed Dan’s face in my small hands and he leaned in further, our kisses drowning out the darkroom and making it seem to burst with light. Not just light but life also. Instantly I forgot the nightmare, instantly I was transformed and breathing deeply I continued to kiss the person who was my entire world at that moment.

Dan reluctantly pulled away, catching his breath and me the same.

His body, pressed against mine, was heated and his heart pounded with fire. I looked up into his eyes. I looked up into Dan's eyes that used to always seem so misted over. They were not smoked with blindness at that second thought, they were burning. Burning with a desire, a want, a need I had never seen before.

'Finally-' he whispered, his voice cracking a little, 'Finally, I understand something clearly at last.'

Waking up to Dan's face so close to mine in the morning is something I would have never thought happen to me. I relished in the events

of last night. I and Dan did not do anything, we just cuddled and made out. We decided to play it safe.

Dan suddenly tensed in his sleep and I quickly placed a comforting hand on his chest. He visibly relaxed and I sighed a sigh of relief. Dan had been doing that a lot all night, he seemed to be tormented by bad dreams. I was tempted to ask him what they were about when he woke up but I did not think it was the right time yet.

Portion

I snuggled into Dan’s chest and loved the pulsating beat his heart gave off. It warmed my cheek and gave me a

sense of happiness. Dan's breathing began to change and I realized that he was no longer sleeping. His hand slowly stroke through my hair and I wondered if he knew that I was awake.

'Good morning'… he mumbled, and that was a yes.

'Good morning'… I murmured, turning my face in a way so that I was looking up at him.

I shivered as Dan slide his hand from my waist and up to my face. Caressing the curves and details of my face. He smiled, pressing his lips to mine and then rolling out of bed. I held onto his hand but finally let go.

‘Scouting today!’… Dan called from the bathroom, peeking his head from around the corner, toothbrush in his mouth.

‘I know, I know’… I mumbled, getting out of bed myself. Dan came out of the bathroom so I went in, brushing my teeth and doing my hair.

‘It may get a little rowdy. We might have to go into places not so appealing. We must find the source of these shots and that may include run-down areas, alley clubs’… Dan called from the room. I peeked my head around the corner as he was pulling on a shirt.

‘You think I’m a helpless little girl, don’t you?’… I asked, fixing my hair into a ponytail, and walking over to him.

‘I never said that exactly.’

Walking over to my duffel bag, I pulled out a shirt and some jeans. Changing my clothes in front of Dan was easier than I thought it would be. He could not see me anyway.

‘Well, It felt like you were implying it’… Dan shrugged. I walked over to him and slipped my hands around his waist.

‘But you will be there, to protect me, right?’ Dan smiled as he slipped his arms around my waist too. I stood on my tippy-toes as he met my face, his lips sinking into mine.

‘Now that’s how you say good morning’…I sighed, releasing myself from Dan and going over to my shoes. He chuckled and began lacing up some boots that I was sure to be steel-toed.

‘Dan; you say we’re going to go to all of these dangerous places. How exactly do we get in?’ I do not think I was as surprised as I should be when Dan pulled out fake Ids.

‘This is how-’

Have you ever walked a full two blocks with black heels on? I was wearing a green dress that Dan had magically wiped out. It fits tightly around my form only ending just above my knees. My hair flowed around me silhouetting my small face. Sensing my shocked face when I put on the dress Dan said, ‘We have to look older.’

‘Dan are we almost there?’ I asked, pulling on the side of my dress, and peering at Dan. He wore black jeans and a snazzy dress shirt.

‘Oh- quit winning. We’re almost there,’ he grabbed my arm and gave me

one of those winning smiles that I had come to hunger for.

‘So-o, is this nightclub’ I asked, as we passed flickering streetlamps being swarmed by moths. The night hair was cool and I would have frozen if it were not for Dan. The streets were starting to become grungier and I realized we were heading into dangerous territory.

‘Yup, Taylor if you want to go back, I can get you a cab and I’ll just do the scouting on my own,’ Dan seemed to be worried about me lately.

-And-

Let your dance with a bunch of desperate girls! I think not!’ Dan laughed and that is when I realized we had reached a line snaking up the side of the sidewalk.

-And-

‘You're nervous,’ Dan informed as If I did not know myself. The line moved faster than I thought and soon we were in front of a thick red rope. A burly dark-skinned man with a striped dress shirt on glared at us behind dark sunglasses.

‘ID,’ he grumbled, letting out a couple of raspy coughs. Dan let go of my hand to dig in his pocket. He pulled

out two shiny pieces of plastic and handed it over.

'Your clear,' the man rasped, practically throwing the cards back at us.

The red velvet rope was pulled back and quickly snapped back into place as we crossed over. That is exactly what it was like, it was like crossing over… To another world.

Strobe lights, pounding music, the smell of cigarettes, and what I was sure to be drugs, filled the air. It also smelled heavily of alcohol and the place was thick with people. I did not know how we were supposed to scout.

Sensing all the people, Dan squeezed my hand tighter.

‘Yah!’ ‘Get it, girl!’ … ‘Wooo-hoo sexy!’ Where the vulgar yells and shouts that I got as we squeezed through the crowd. A colony party was nothing compared to this. I glared at a drunk bastard when he slapped me squarely on the butt.

‘Are you ok Taylor?’ Dan asked, coughing on the thick smoke in the air.

‘Yeah,’ I lied.

‘I know you probably not going to like this but we need to split up so

we can scout better,' I looked at Dan like he was crazy.

'You'll be fine' he started, sensing my fear, 'I can pinpoint your emotions out of the whole wide world.' He leaned down and kissed me slowly and firmly on the lips. My mouth-watering when he pulled away. 'Stay safe,' he whispered in my ear as he backed out of my vision, getting swallowed up by the crowd.

I instantly felt a hollow pang in my chest. How was I supposed to scout in such a horrible place? Feeling the hungry eyes of grown men watching my

every move, I made myself go invisible. I felt more secure that way.

The nightclub was what you could call a warehouse, fluorescent lights that had stopped working ages ago looked like vacant eye sockets. Instead, strobe lights had been placed strategically around the club, looking like they were pulsating to the beat of the music on their own accord. The warehouse had a tall ceiling that made the sound escalate into hollow echoes.

Pushing through the crowd with a determined demeanor that I put on to mask my nervousness, I did not

even notice the person I nearly knocked down.

‘Hey watch where your go-’ the boy stopped, realizing that there was no one there. When really, I was standing right in front of him. I was about to dart away from his searching eyes when I realized something.

This boy looked firmly, Taylor.

Then it clicked…

Waiting for the strobe lights to provide a second of darkness I made myself visible.

‘Scotty?’…, I squeaked, not fully grasp the concept of running into

my ex-boyfriend. He was a little taller than I remembered. His hair a thick scruff around his head. But he was Scotty, it was all there. His thick black eyebrows, penetrating forest green eyes that were, even more, enduring then mine, one of a kind smirks that made it look like he was doing a full smile.

'Taylor you know I prefer 'Scott' better' he teased, surprising me as he hooked a lean arm around my waist and pulled me into a hug. I rocked back a little bit at the force of his hug but his arms steadied me. I was

about to pull away when Taylor’s home all hit me.

Scotty was wearing his signature Axe. Somewhere mingled in with that sent were aftershave and chlorine water. Scott was our school's star swimmer and I remember the days when I would go to all his meets.

We finally pulled away from our hug and my mind still felt fuddled.

‘Well, aren’t you going to say something?’… He asked, his thick eyebrows snaking up like caterpillars into a worried arch. I remembered those eyebrows, the very one I used to smooth down whenever he got mad

with my small fingers. Too many memories were coming back all at once and I took a hesitant step back.

‘Um-mm, why are you talking to me?’ I knew it sounded rude. Something you should nott say to someone you have not seen in half of a year. It is just that Scotty broke up with me, ripping out my heart and dragging it with him when he left me dumbstruck in the hallway that heartbreaking afternoon. He had heard the rumors about me. Ability and it was only a matter of time.

‘Why am I talking to you? Taylor, I haven’t seen you in like…

forever’ the smile came back and I sighed, looking around me for some possible escape. Why did I have to make myself visible?

‘I thought you thought I was a freak’ I said clear and firm, my face blank, not showing the fluttery feeling I felt inside.

‘About that…’ I was again caught by surprise as Scott grabbed my hand and started leading me through the crowd, pushing aside people who would not move. We reached a corner with a small café like a round table and two metal chairs. I took a seat and watched as Scotty fallowed.

‘About that…’ he started again, doing that thing where he rests his elbow on the table and fiddles with the front of his hair, ‘I didn’t want to break up with you.’ If I said I was fuddled before, that was just an understatement to how I feel now.

‘What?’ Was all I could muster.

‘I know it sounds immature but, everyone else was telling me these… things about you. How you were sick, weird a freak if you must and I did not believe them. You were my girlfriend; I knew you better than they did and knew you were none of those

things but then.' He seemed to be thinking of a way to explain further.

'But then…' I prodded.

'But then my father's voice came to a low whisper as he said these words. I shuddered as the memories of Scott's father came back to me. He was a firm, brutish man with hair and brows like Scotty's but was sprinkled with grey. He had a squares stance to him that made you want to almost bow in his presence.

'Your father didn't like the idea of you going out with a freak,' I finished, my nose began to burn and so did my eyes. I rubbed them furiously

before a tear could fall. Here I thought I was finally over this boy, now he was shoved back into my face and I was on the verge of crying.

'Taylor you know my father was always a science man. Always up for a discovery, spending long hours at the lab in the college he worked at. He welcomed the unknown, but to him, your ability was not only unknown but unnatural,' I cringed as Scott said those words.

'Are you trying to say that peer pressure and your father's criticism is what made you force me to give back the necklace you got me on our first

date?' everything was starting to get blurry and I lifted my eyes to the ceiling, forcing the tears to slide back in.

'I'm sorry Taylor, I am, but dad wouldn't accept me going out with someone who had abilities, it would go against his new project' Scott tried to slide his hand unto mine but I jerked away.

'And what was this new project?' My voice faltered and cracked under the pressure of sitting there with him.

'The anti-mutation shots…'

‘Mr. Avery created the anti-mutation shots?’ I squeaked, peering through the thick darkness, and trying to make out Scott’s face through the glow of the streetlamp. Usually, a party dies down after a few hours but that jungle in there was going strong and even stronger so we decided to talk outside. It felt good to unclog my lungs that seemed to be drowning in smoke.

‘Yes… he did,’ Scott said, dusting off the side of his shoe as we sat on the curb. If it were not for the fact that my mind was on one hundred things at once I would have noticed how eerie the alley seemed.

‘He’s the reason people with abilities are losing the one thing that makes them special?’ I asked again, my voice taking on a sharper tone.

‘Taylor, I know it’s wrong but-’ I cut him off with a flash of my eyes.

‘Wrong Scotty…? It’s inhumane to take away a piece of someone’s identity’ the words were tumbling out and I found myself speaking my mind to the first boy I had ever had feelings for and trust me there had been many. That one kid, who after Scotty, pretended to like me but just wanted to see if he could get powers by kissing me. Then there was Ben, but I have

realized now that I just did not feel the same as he felt for me. We cannot forget Dan, who has been there for me in this scary little field trip.

(Please know that Taylor was just the heat of the moment.)

Scott began to talk again, as I thought about all of this, ‘I know Ro’ he started using the nickname I had not heard in ages, ‘but I can’t go up against my father, he’ll always have the upper hand, I’m just the loyal son who saved his dad money on a swimming scholarship.’

‘You got the scholarship, huh?’ I smirked, giving a small smile, and

picking my cuticles. It did not make sense for us to keep going back and forth like that. This was our last conversation and I did not want it to end badly.

'Yah… fastest in the state,' he attempted a smile to but it mostly came out as a grimace. His mind was somewhere else, now and time he did not care about a school scholarship, he cared about…

'So, what brings you to a nightclub? I would have never imagined bumping into Taylor Lovett at a nightclub-' he leaned back, probably taking in my skimpy dress for the first

time but I knew as he stared at me that he was looking at the Taylor he dated back at the beginning of ninth grade.

‘Just business,’ I started, avoiding his gaze, ‘What brings you here?’

‘I’m here on a whim. Some of the guys dared me to come here. They said I would not even last one night. But here I am, no body parts were strewn across the alley floor,’ he chuckled, imitating his body as If checking to see, that all his bones were there. For the first time that night, I laughed.

‘Wow, except for your height you haven’t changed a bit Scotty. Still crumbling under peer-pressure and still cracking jokes,’ his eyes sparkled at the sound of my laugh. I was smiling then but my smile dropped as a sudden look of sadness took over Scott.

‘God, I miss your laugh’ he whispered, taking a rock, and scratching against the cold floor. A wind blew by making me grasp my bear arms and watch a newspaper blow in the wind.

‘Scotty…’ was all I could say. He was the one who broke up with me. He threw the rock and turned to me

suddenly, a question forming in his eyebrows.

‘Do… Do you remember the Gazebo’ It was either the question or the second wind that sucked the words out of me?

‘Yah,’ I finally stuttered. After Scott had left me dumb-struck in the hall, staring down at the linoleum floor as it blurred with my tears I vowed to destroy, lock away, and bury any reminder of him.

The Gazebo… but the Gazebo is a place you can never forget.

‘I’m sorry Taylor, I should have never brought it back up, I-,’ I placed a hand on his arm which caught him by surprise. I took that same hand and slowly placed a piece of my hair behind my ear.

‘No, it’s fine,’ I whispered, taking a deep breath, and feeling myself practically transporting back to that day.

‘Danny!’ I squealed, wrapping my arms around his shoulders as he tickled me again. Finally, he stopped and I just fell into him on the grass. It had been one whole month since we went out and as we spent time together

after school, sitting under an old tree at the park, we wondered what we should do to celebrate.

'I got nothing Ro, it seems like we've already been everywhere from our other dates' Scott said, hooking his arm behind my neck as we laid on the grass under the tree.

'Not every,' I whispered, the words leaving my mouth before I could take them back. Danny rolled over so that he was over me know. He was not putting all his weight on me but I could still feel his body pressed to mine. A knowing look was in his eyes as he searched my face.

‘Are you sure Ro, or did you say that just to say it’ me and Scott rarely ever had serious talks. He was such a silly guy that it never crossed our minds to sit down have a serious talk occasionally.

‘I… I’… Looking into Danny’s eyes I knew he was ready, but he wanted to make sure I was ready. He wanted to make sure I was emotionally up for it. He was being a good boyfriend, but I did not want to keep him waiting. If he got tired of me? What if he decided I was an immature baby that could not hold her own?

‘Taylor?’ Scott asked, wondering why it was taking me so long to answer.

‘Of course,’ I answered my voice sounding surer than my body.

The sun was dipping lower in the sky as we reached the Gazebo every ninth grader at my school has visited at least once. Even though I was confidently leading Scott to the steps of the Gazebo… Butterflies were doing backflips in my stomach. Was I ready for this?

Was I ready for this?

‘Are you sure?’… Danny asked again, as he pulled out two packs of something you become very harsh like when you take a health class. My mouth was denying the pounding of my heart as I sat down on the wooden benches, feeling the carvings of past couples as I said…

‘Yes!’

Another cold breeze blew back my hair, dragging me to the here and now of things. Scott was calling my name, snapping his fingers in front of my eyes.

‘Earth to Taylor? I know you’re an angel but you need to come back

down to earth' I laughed at the saying he used to whisper to me in math class when I would zone out.

Too- many, memories.

'Sorry I was just…'

'Remembering?' He finished for me, side glancing at me. That night was full of so much emotion, so much intimacy that I did not even go to school the next day. Scott was worried that he emotionally scarred me for life but I came to school the next day and we had a nice…. Long… talk.

'Yah, remembering…' I was not expecting Scott's arm to snake around

my waist and pull me closer to him. I was not expecting my head to fit naturally in the nook of his neck and place my arm around his waist too.

'I hope this isn't too awkward for you Ro,' he chuckled, his breath warm against my cold scalp.

'Surprisingly... no,' I admitted, telling myself over and repeatedly that this was just a friendly hug.

'I'm guessing you came here with a man?' It was the first time Scott had implied that I had found someone else by now. I was wondering if he found someone else too.

‘Yah his name is-’ but I was not able to finish as someone cleared their throat behind us. I was not surprised to turn and see smoked over blue eyes staring over the top of our heads. I instinctively moved away from Scott.

‘Yeah, she did come with a man. And he happens to be me’ Dan said.

‘Taylor?’… Dan said in a tone that was more like ‘Start explaining.’

‘Hey Dan, I bumped into…’ I didn’t know how to explain that I had bumped into my ex so- I winged it, a friend from my old school, we were just

talking.’ I jumped up from the curve and took a step toward him.

‘His name is Danny- I mean Scott… his name is Scott,’ I feel relieved for not vomiting all over the alley floor.

‘Dan, is it?’ Scott said, sticking out his hand as if he and Dan had met before. I thought I would have to explain the fact that Dan could not see his hand when he stuck it out and placed it in Scott’s.

‘Nice to meet yah,’ he said, but by spending a few months with Dan I knew he did not sound so… nice.

‘So, you Ro’s date to this crazy place?’ Scott asked, trying to fill the silence with small talk.

‘Yes, I’m Taylor’s date,’ Dan answered, emphasizing my full name. I was not the least surprised when he stuck out his arm and hooked it around my waist, pulling me into his chest. Scott did not take his eyes off my face as he continued to talk.

‘Your eyes are quite unusual; do you have abilities like Taylor?’ Dan tensed under my fingers as Scott asked this.

‘I’m blind and I have highly trained senses so yes… I guess you can

say I have abilities at once was the perfect time to go invisible. I tried to look anywhere but Danny's penetrating green eyes.

The entrance to the club happens to be a rusted metal door. The stairs that stepped up to the door ending in a flat landing. The street light that was being fussed over by a lone fly. The high-heels that had not broken a heel yet. Dan's arm clutching my waist.

But then I looked up and met those eyes again.

'Cool… cool…' Scott said, obviously running out of words to say.

My mind was reeling with the possibilities of what could happen next. Dan would fight Scott. Scott would fight Dan. The possibilities were endless.

'Um… Dan, can I talk to you for a sec?' I asked after one whole minute of them burning holes into each other with their eyes.

'Sure,' he grabbed my hand and I lifted a finger to Scott telling him 'One sec' and walked a little bit away from the curb.

'Who's that?' Dan asked, not holding back as soon as we were out of earshot distance.

‘I already told you, he’s a-’

‘Save it, Taylor, I may be blind but I’m not stupid’ I felt like he had just slapped me in the face. He was mad but it hurt to see him this way, knowing that he could be the sweet Dan from last night. We were only teenagers, why did life have to be so difficult?

‘I never said you were stupid Dan’ I mumbled, pulling my hand away from his and wrapping my arms protectively around me. The wind made me shudder.

‘Well telling me lies makes it seem that way’ he crossed his arms and

stood, waiting for me to start explaining.

‘He- He’s my ex-boyfriend,’ something that felt like a golf ball was lodged in my throat as I explained this simple fact to Dan. I felt like a dirty cheater just saying the words. I and Dan had told each other last night that we really like each other and there I was, hugging my ex-boyfriend.

‘Taylor- you can’t hide anything from me so why even bother lying’ I looked up as Dan continued, ‘I sensed how you were feeling and it was a mixture of a lot of things, but the one that stood out the most is the confusion

you feel for him.' Dan pointed his finger in the direction of Scott who was kicking the curb, shoulders drooped, head down, just standing there.

'So- you knew from the beginning?' I asked, raising one eyebrow.

'Yeah,' he sighed, taking both of my hands in his and kissing my knuckles. A wave of heat coursed through my veins making the tips of my ears tingle.

'Dan there's something else though,' I said quickly before I would forget.

‘What is it?’

‘I think- Well I know who created the shots,’ Dan’s eyes went wide as I whispered this. I looked over at Scott to see if he could hear me. He was not looking so I leaned in closer to Dan.

‘Scott’s father,’ I whispered so softly I almost did not hear myself, but I knew Dan heard. He knitted his eyebrows and seemed to be contemplating all of what I said. I felt dirty for just blabbering about something Danny confided in me but it was for the good of the colony.

‘Come on,’ Dan said finally, leading me back to where Scott stood.

He already had a plan.

‘That was more than one sec I’m afraid’ Scott joked, spinning on his heel as we walked towards the curb.

‘Sorry,’ I said, flashing him a quick smile.

‘Yeah, we were just talking about how we were going to get back to the hotel’ Dan said bluntly, a little smirk forming under his words. The look on Scott's face was one I had never witnessed. First, it was surprising, then it was confusion, the

next anger, and finally, he was trying to compose himself.

‘Um… Hotel, Huh?’ He said, directing the question to Dan but looking dead at me.

‘Yah,’ I murmured, finding the speck on my shoulder more interesting as I brushed it off.

‘Well… um… don’t you think a hotel’s a little …inappropriate?’… Scott implied, pulling on the collar of his shirt. I saw Dan smile again and knew that Danny was falling shamelessly into his trap.

‘Yeah, but hey, there’s nowhere else for us to stay,’ Dan shrugged as if he was bummed about having to stay in a hotel when trust me, he was not.

‘You know…’ Scott started, Dan looked up, from staring at the floor, hopefully, ‘My dad does have some guest rooms and maybe I could call him up and ask if you guys could stay a couple of days?’

Dan shrugged his shoulders as if to say ‘Whatever’ and I said, ‘That would be great.’ As Scott went over to the other side of the alley to make the call, Dan turned to me and smiled.

‘That was too easy,’ he gloated, and I punched him lightly on the arm.

‘Just remember Dan he can’t take it easy on him’ I lectured, wagging my finger up and down.

‘I know, I know’ he said, grabbing by wagging my finger and swallowing up my hand with his. I took a step closer to him and loved the way the moon shone down into his eyes, reflecting pools of glimmering grey. He pulled my hand into his chest and I felt the thumping of his heart. I was not surprised when Dan’s face began to descend to mine, his eyes closing and mines closing too. I began to tilt my

head up in his direction when Danny said from behind us…

‘My dad said yes-’ Dan cursed under his breath, opening his eyes, and standing up straight. I sighed and just turned to look at Danny. He knew we were going to kiss.

‘Great,’ Dan murmured in reply.

‘Here we are’ it still took me by surprise when we pulled up to Danny’s house, scratch that, Estate. The tall gates opened to a gravel road that crackled under Scott’s car. It was an original Mazda Taiki. The orange lights that lit up the front of the house-made

it look like a showcase instead of a home. The garage, as if sensing our presence, immediately rolled up allowing Scott to glide in. That is exactly what it was like, gliding.

‘Whoa, you cleaned up the garage Danny?’ I gasped, looking at the meticulously organized racks and wide-open area for the cars. The last time I was in this garage it had two old bean bags, a torn computer chair, an Emmaio chair, a musky rug, and an old guitar and drums from when Scott was trying to start a band.

Dan cringed at the use of Scott's nickname coming out of my mouth and we all got out of the car.

'I sure did, it took a little help from the guys but…' he shrugged, and we walked up to the garage door leading to the kitchen. Our bags hung on our shoulders- (we picked them up from the hotel.)

'I see one place hasn't changed-' I said, as we stepped into the warm and welcoming kitchen. It was silent as a lone light glowed over the stovetop. The huge refrigerator made a low humming sound as we walked past. Dan and Scott continued to the foyer

but I found myself frozen in front of the massive kitchen with its polished marble tops.

I found myself squinting and almost seeing shadows of me and Danny playing around with cupcake batter. Throwing it at each other, getting it stuck in our hair, wiping it on each other's noses. Then Scott was sucking some icing off my finger and then we were kissing and…

Too- many, memories.

'Taylor come on!' Dan called, snapping me out of the past. I heard them shuffling up the stairs and hurried to catch up.

‘There are two empty rooms close to the stairs and two empty rooms close to the back. Pick away’ Scott said as if he said this to every person who wanted to spend the night. I and Dan looked at each other asking, ‘Separate rooms?’

‘If you were wondering, my father said you guys have to be in… separate rooms,’ Dan could not see it but I saw the smirk on Scott’s face.

‘Right-’ was all Dan said as I saw him make his way to the back of the hallway and turned to the right. For the first time that night, it felt awkward just standing there with Scott.

‘Well, I’ll take a room close to the stairs,’ I said timidly, turning around and heading for the door, I was about to drop my bag when Scott touched me lightly on the shoulder. A jolt went through my arm almost making me fall.

‘Tomorrow my dad meets Dan’ he taunted, making his hand slide off my shoulder and turning to go down the stairs.

‘Yaa-any-’ I said in mock joy.

I must admit. Ben’s silk sheets with satin lacing are better than the slept in sheets at the hotel. I woke up with a trail of drool following me and I

wiped the side of my mouth sleepily. Been said he wanted us to at least say hi to his dad and then we did not have to affiliate with him for the rest of our stay. We had to wake up early because Mr. Avery wakes up early to go to the Lab.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and squinted my eyes against the glare of the sun shining brightly through the silk curtains. I rubbed my eyes vigorously and did a deep stretch. I almost forgot all the events that happened last night but just like a bad dream it eventually comes rushing back to you.

I got up and slumped towards the giant bathroom that I did not deserve. The tile was cool beneath my feet and I slapped some water on my face and brushed my teeth. After rummaging around in my bag, my hair tangled brush and swiped my mane up into a ponytail. I heard movement on the other side of the house and assumed Dan was awake too. I quickly grabbed some loose jogging sweats and a white tee hoping to catch Dan before he went downstairs.

There were some things left unsaid last night and we needed to talk. I grabbed the shiny brass knob and

pulled open the door just as Dan was walking down the hall. He raised his one eyebrow as I came flying down the hall, ran into him, grabbed him, and pulled him into an unused guest room. He looked at me in surprise.

Portion

‘Dan, we need to talk’ I said, already having everything that I was about to say mapped out.

‘Really?’ … He said as if he did not see this coming.

‘Yes Really,’ I mocked, ‘I need to know… I need to know how you feel about Danny- I mean Been?’ I asked,

feeling insecure under Dan's blind eyes for the first time.

'Ben…' he said, as if tasting his name on his tongue, 'I think he's just like any other normal guy out there.' I feel relieved, at least he was being neutral.

'Well that's-umm- …good,' I stuttered, switching from one foot to the next.

'Spit it out, Taylor.'

'I think we should take things easy for right now,' I blurted, slapping my hands over my mouth. I did not

know whether I should have said it, yet, but Dan had forced it out of me.

'What do you mean?' He said, taking a step closer.

'What I mean is that this trip was supposed to be strictly business but then we… kissed and Dan it is obvious that I like you okay but I feel like our emotions are getting in the way of what we came here for so I guess you can say that-,' I was not able to finish as Dan grabbed my waist and pressed his lips unto mine. His mouth began to move slowly and so did mine, mimicking his wave-like patterns. All the thoughts that I had so pain-

snakingly planned out in my head went down the drain.

He pulled away and rested his head on my forehead. I took two deep breaths and put my arms lightly on his shoulders.

‘You are one sneaky little boy you know that?’ I whispered, out of breath and completely out of mind. Dan chuckled and pulled me even deeper into his chest.

‘Now what were you saying?’ He teased, taking his head off me and kissing my cheek, right at the corner of my mouth.

‘As I can remember-’ I sighed, as he kissed my jaw and then my neck and then my shoulder. A wave of heat coursed through me making my voice stop in my throat.

‘I think I’m helping,’ he grinned, kissing down the length of my arm and finally my palm, leaving my fingers on fire.

‘Actually, you’re not’… I saw the confused look on his face as I pushed lightly away. I gemmated down my hair that had gone awry and smoothed out the shirt that suspiciously lifted above my navel. Dan leaned on the door behind me and waited.

‘Dan I’m serious, we can sort all this outback at the colony but here… here we need to take things seriously,’ he stayed stone still and completely silent as if reading my emotions to see if I was telling the truth.

‘You're confused, aren’t you?’ He inquired after what seemed like an hour.

‘Excuse me?’… I had just never sounded so sure in my life and Dan was asking if I was confused?!

‘Look it’s obvious you still have feelings for a fish boy who so kindly gave us rooms only because he knew you were going to be here, so maybe I

should get out of your way until you're not confused anymore’ Dan leaned bizarre and turned for the door. I grabbed his arm so fast that it surprised him.

‘Why whenever I try to make things better you assume, I’m trying to make things worse?’ tears were stinging my eyes and it felt like a sock was in my throat but no tears fell. Dan looked back at me and frowned. ‘Because,’ he started, turning so that his head was facing the door again, ‘what’s better for you isn’t always better for me.’

I waited two minutes after he left before heading out the door myself.

‘Dad this is Dan,’ Dan stuck out his hand as Scoot said his name.

Ben’s father shook it.

‘And you remember Taylor…’ Ben’s father just nodded at me and I followed. He kept appraising me and Dan like we were a specimen under his microscope.

‘You know Taylor, my lab’s always open if you will consider being my subject’ his voice was gravel deep and his thick eyebrows made him look serious all the time. I took a deep

breath and tried to answer as politely as possible.

‘Thanks for letting us stay here Mr. Avery, but I’m not a test subject’ the room got quiet as I said this and everyone seemed to be just staring at each other.

‘Very well then, have a wonderful day,’ then he was gone, his white lab coat swooshing at his knees as he closed the front door. We just stood in the foyer, continuing our stares when Danny spoke up.

‘Well, that went well!’ He said, clasping his hands together, ‘I thought he’d never leave.’

I just smiled and Dan acted like he was bored.

‘You guys deserve a tour. Up for it?’ Ben’s feet were muffled on the cool marble as he walked towards a sitting room.

‘I think I’ll pass on your tour… I can explore on my own’ Dan excused himself and I couldn’t help but think ‘please Dan, don’t do anything risky.’ I just knew he was going to snoop around the house to find out more about the shots.

‘What about you Ro?’ Ben asked, raising his eyebrows into a question. I could not believe Dan was

leaving me alone with Danny. He was mad at me, trying to prove something. I walked over to an eager Ben who seemed to be hanging on every word I said. ‘I’ve already seen your house Danny’ I reasoned, watching a disappointing frown form on his face. Then he smiled.

‘Yeah but I bet you haven’t seen ‘The Shack,’’ I found myself following Ben out the door and around the side of the house.

‘The Shack?’ I questioned, wondering what was so exciting about a shack anyway.

‘Yeah, it’s a cool little hangout spot me- and the boys made. Usually, it is no girls aloud but I think I can make an exception,’ we walked across the massive backyard of the estate towards a little white house. It looked like a regular-sized house but paled in comparison to the estate.

‘This is the Shack?’

‘Yeah, too hard to believe?’ I shoved Ben playfully from behind as we stepped inside. What I saw made me burst out laughing. The Shack looked like an elegant regular house on the outside but inside...

Inside it was a mess.

Comic books cluttered a wooden table that was set in the middle of the old bean bags, office chair, and Emmaio chair I thought Danny got rid of. Posters of rock bands clustered the wall and a set of steel ladders led up to a makeshift loft. A big TV with multiple game systems hooked up to it sat amongst it all.

I could not stop laughing as I held my middle, pointing at a half-eaten hoagie.

'You… You picked up the garage and dropped into this nice-looking place… Then… then called it 'The Shack',' I managed to say. Ben

sighed and picked up one of the comics to the only drop back down again.

‘Ok, ok I know it’s funny’ he said after a while. I wiped a few stray tears and smiled.

‘You’ve outdone yourself this time Danny,’ I fingered the cool metal of the flat screen.

‘It’s Ben…’

‘Danny…’

‘Ben…’

‘Danny…’

‘Ben…’

I stayed frozen still as I felt Ben's uneven breath right by my ear. I wanted to shudder at the shiver that just ran down my spine but did not want to give him the satisfaction. His warm hands rub the side of my arms. I could only lightly feel him standing behind me.

'You know I'm always going to call you Danny,' I said, trying to focus on the cover of a comic instead of his hands on me and his breath in my ear.

'I know, it's just that I love hearing you call me that. No one's called me that in a long time,' I let out a deep breath as Ben dropped his

hands and seemed to hesitate before stepping away from me. He walked over to the steel ladder and put one foot on it, turning to me.

'Want to see where this leads to?'

'Sure,' I answered after looking the ladder up and down.

We reached the top of the ladder, and my assumption that up here was a loft was correct. It was more than a loft though; it was a view. My breath caught in my throat as I stepped onto the hardwood floor and walked slowly towards a large window that wrapped around the whole top of the

house. The crest that Ben's estate sat on made it the perfect view of the city. I let my fingers trace the tall buildings and bustling cars that sped out and into sight. Was I seeing this? Was I witnessing this? Could the place I dreaded so much be so beautiful? The sunrise in the distance only answered that question for me.

'It's nice, huh?'… I had almost forgotten Ben was there and jumped as he appeared beside me.

'Nice? It's amazing,' I breathed, letting my hand drop to my side and peering down at the people

who were oblivious to my wondering eyes.

‘When I got this little house built, I thought it would be cool to have a view’ he continued, resting his hand on the window too.

‘It was an awesome idea,’ I admitted, lowering myself into a sit.

‘Yah… I remember we used to always produce the wackiest ideas’ Ben chuckled and laughed into his hand. I drummed the floor.

‘Like that time- we took that old wagon and tried to ride it down the

hill' I added- 'Or when we taught our class parrot how to curse,' he put in.

'When we spied on Miss. Baker and caught her in her pantyhose' by now I had my forehead pressed against the glass laughing.

'What about the time we put chocolate fudge on one of my dad's slides and he thought he found a new strain of plant species' now we were both laughing hard, looking at each other only made us laugh harder.

'That time I ruined my dress for the Halloween dance- so you tore your tuxedo and we went as zombies' Ben just looked over at me and smiled,

his green eyes twinkling. He scooted towards me a little until our shoulders were brushing. I felt the urge to move away… But did not.

‘Our first kiss,’ it was not an accident as the words left Ben’s lips. He meant to say it, as he looked over at me, I could see that he meant to say it. Then his face was coming towards me.

‘No,’ I said suddenly, stopping him by his shoulder, ‘we can’t.’

‘Who said?’ He taunted, the ways his eyes danced made me want to just move in.

‘My conscience, the little voice deep down inside telling me this is wrong’ my voice did not waver but stayed clear and strong, making it seem like I knew what I wanted when really… I did not. Danny grabbed my hand and squeezed it as it laid on his shoulder.

‘Ro,’ he whispered, his eyes pleading. For what? I do not know.

‘Danny,’ I whispered back, trying so hard to fight the urge. What about Dan? I could not just be another statistic. The girl who falls forex that broke up with her because she cannot handle being alone with him. I could nott betray Dan like that, I could not

prove that what he said right. He was wrong about me still having feelings for Ben, he was wrong.

Yet despite all of this, I leaned in for the kiss.

I do not know why I began to kiss Ben. It was because I am a weak sucker for love. Probably because I wanted to see if Dan was right and that I still had feelings for him. Or I just missed the feeling of his lips slightly grazing mine. A vibrating warmth spread through my body making me shudder as I leaned backward, and Ben followed. He grabbed my face in his hands and continued to kiss me but

deeper and longer this time. I felt like I was reliving the events of the gazebo as his tongue came sliding into my mouth making my cheeks burn.

The adrenaline took over my thoughts as I began to unbuckle his belt and felt myself undoing his button. I unzipped his zipper and began to pull on his pants when Ben pulled away from my eager lips and looked at me straight in the eye, his breath uneven as it warmed my lips.

‘I shouldn’t be doing this to you,’ he whispered, grabbing my hand that laid on his zipper. He curled his

hands into a fist at my sides and rested his head on my bare stomach.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, my head still fuzzy from what almost happened. I took his head in my hands as he just laid there.

‘I mean… it shouldn’t be this way. I shouldn’t have seduced you like that’ he murmured, his hair tickling my bare skin.

‘I’m such a slut,’ I heard myself whispering. I grabbed my forehead with my hand and turned my head away from him.

‘Taylor doesn’t say that’ I began to cry into my hands as Ben stroked my hair, ‘Ro, come on…’

‘Just… don’t touch me!’ I scrambled away from his grasp, groping for the top of the ladder.

‘Taylor wait!’ I did not wait, I lowered myself unto the metal rods and went down one clang at a time. Boys always made me feel special and whenever I got a chance to kiss them, I took it. But now I was tired of playing the role ‘easy to get.’

‘Ro wait! I’m sorry!’ Ben started to fallow me down and I tried to

go down as fast I could with blurry vision.

‘Don’t call me that’ I whispered, finally reaching the bottom floor, and running towards the door. I darted across the backyard and ran towards the back door, opening it in a hurry and slamming it shut. I heard Ben open the back door too as I sprinted through the den, two sitting rooms, and then finally the foyer.

‘Taylor I’m sorry!’

I ran up the stairs and was aiming for the guest room I was staying in but instead ran straight into Dan’s broad chest. His face showed confusion

as I stumbled to the floor and tried to get back up.

‘Taylor?’ He asked, grabbing my hand, and pulling me up.

‘I’m sorry Dan, I’m so sorry’ I gasped, crying as I said it.

‘What happened Taylor?’ His voice was cold. I grabbed his forearms.

‘I didn’t mean to kiss him it just happened and I’m sorry Dan, I am, I-’ I stood shocked as he took my hands and brushed them off his forearms. His face was stone hard as he glared behind smoked over eyes.

‘As I said before, what’s better for you is worse for me. I hope you enjoyed your little make-out session,’ I still couldn’t grasp the fact that he was mad as we heard footsteps running up the stairs.

‘I’m sorry but this is your fight,’ he whispered as Ben appeared at the top of the stairs. I wanted to call out but only a squeak escaped my lips as Dan walked away and back to his room.

‘Taylor, we should talk,’ Ben said quickly, grabbing my arm but I backed away.

‘No Ben’ I said firmly, ‘I’m leaving tomorrow.’

‘I don’t know,’ I whimpered. The wrinkled lady looked at me behind blue beady eyes and peered over her thin glasses. The clock ticked loudly in that silent room and my mind raced faster than my heart.

‘What do you mean child?’ She asked, crossing her legs, and resting her notepad on her knee. I sucked in a deep breath and squeezed the pillow that I clutched in my hand.

‘I mean… I don’t know why I do the things- I do,’ I whispered. The lady, Evelyn Pauper her desk plague said, nodded her head slowly, and then looked straight at me.

‘And that makes you feel…?’ she leaned forward in her chair.

‘Scared,’ I finished. A giant teardrop escaped from my eye and plopped unto the sheer white coach I was curled upon. Evelyn scribbled some more notes vigorously with pruned hands. My eyes wavered over to the window that was misted over with dew.

‘This… the scared feeling you get. Would you describe it as… anxiety?’

There were a light glow and mist on the windowpane, signaling the return of rain. I wiped my moist face

and stretched out my sleepy legs. ‘I don’t know. I just…’ I was looking for the right impossible words to explain to a normal person like Evelyn Pauper.

‘I’m usually the girl who’s invisible to the world’ I started, and excitement stirring in me suddenly, ‘I’m that one girl that people seem to look through unto the other side. Lately, though, there has been… people… who can see me? The real me. See me as I’ve never been seen before.’ Evelyn nodded her head the whole time I talked and finally when I finished, she slipped off her glasses and seemed to stare blankly out of the window like me.

‘Do you care to tell me who these people are?’ She asked after a long silence. I kept staring out the window. At the alley below. The kids playing in the puddles. The people blocking their heads with newspapers as they walked along the sidewalks. Watching them from my perch at the window I did not want to answer Evelyn.

‘There are these two boys,’ I whispered. Evelyn looked away from the window to study my crestfallen face.

‘Can’t decide between the two?’ She asked. I finally pulled away

from the window to see the small smile on her face. She was good.

Portion

‘I thought I did. One is different from me. I and he have been through some stuff and it is like he can see right through me. The other is what you could call…. An old flame. I and he have had our fair share of firsts and every time I’m around him I feel like…’ my words finally failed me- and I went back to staring out the window. Anywhere was better than looking at the face of the wise.

‘A match made in heaven and an old flame? You have a problem with

your hand’… she inquired while scribbling on her little pad.

I gulped and fiddled with my fingers.

‘I guess…’

Evelyn took off her glasses and tossed her pad onto her desk. She made it over to the couch and took a cautious seat next to me. She smelled like roses, rain, and prune juice.

‘I guess’ isn’t just it. It is a means of surrender. In this situation, it is saying ‘I give up’,’ She rubbed her easily her skirt and scrunched her eyebrows together, ‘Surrendering is

something you can live with. You can run, run far away from your troubles. Or you can fight. Fight for what you know is right and what you know will make everything ok again.'

I folded my legs together and looked at her with new eyes. She made it sound so... Easy.

'It's that easy?'

'Only you can make it easy' her wise old face answered, and if it were not improper, I would have hugged her right there and then.

My feet thudded rapidly as I ran across the slippery pavement. It

took all my might not to lose my balance and fall into the murky rainwater. People looked at me with puzzling expressions as I sped past them and nearly knocked them over.

‘Slow down girl!’ a woman with three kids and a grocery bag yelled at me. I did not stop though, I ran faster. My chest thumped loudly with the beating of my overworked heart.

This was something I had to do because, if I did not, it would be a mistake I would regret forever.

‘Ah!’ I said, slipping and nearly falling on the cold pavement. I caught myself in time and stumbled to a stand

as I stared up at the big house coming up. The one with the graveled lawn and perfect view of the city. The city I grew up in and the city that I feared.

I kept running and felt the chilly air whipping at my lungs, making my throat burn.

‘Wait!’ I called the tall figure packing up the army green jeep parked in the driveway. ‘Wait!’

I charged up the incline just as the faint figure shut the trunk. He turned around at the sound of my voice.

‘Please! Just wait for one-’ I tripped on the slick gravel again but

got right back up as little pieces of rock embedded my hands and knees. The figure crossed his arms over his broad chest and kept the solid rock stare he was wearing unchanging.

‘What do you want?’ He said bitterly, his tongue lashing like a viper. My fingers felt numb as I wiped the tears from my eyes with a shaking hand. I took two steps over the wet gravel so that I was right in front of him.

‘Dan’ I started, my voice wavering only a little, ‘You may be blind… but you can see me. See me more than anyone ever could. Dan- I…’

‘Get on with it- Taylor’ He snapped, surprising me.

‘Dan, I love you,’ I said confidently, a single raindrop falling on my nose, ‘I love the way you hold me, reassure me, and kiss me when I least expect it.’ Dan was about to say something but I continued. ‘Dan I’ve finally realized that you mean a lot to me. I am sorry about what happened to Ben. It was not supposed to happen, Dan. Now I know that-’

‘Taylor stop-!’ He said louder now. My voice stopped but my mouth stayed open. ‘How do you think I felt when you rushed up those stairs with

that guilty look on your face. Do you know what it feels like to be on the side that was played?'

'Dan-'

'No! You do not know…. Because you never been the player… just the player.'

'Dan!' I said louder now, surprise filling my voice. This could not be happening; Dan was supposed to forgive me and love me. Everything was supposed to be forgotten.

'Your special Taylor, your pretty too, but that's not enough for me to just forgive you,' he walked away

from my shocking form and got into the driver's side of the frosted jeep.

‘My love should be enough Dan!’ I yelled, tears stinging my eyes and making them burn like never. ‘It should be enough!’

‘Just get in the car unless you plan to move in with Ben!’ he yelled back, the engine roaring to life. My breath came out in small puffs in front of me. My tears freezing on my face. I got in the car and felt like I was going to throw up as I buckled my seatbelt and tried not to look at Dan. My breath made frosted crystals on the window glass as we pulled out of the driveway.

The rain started to fall harder on the moving Jeep. It felt like something had been ripped out of me.

'Dan-,' I tried again, my voice barely a whisper.

'Not now Taylor…'

I stepped out of the elevator and did not stop to talk to anyone. I made no eye contact and even went as far as turning myself invisible. A couple of people were already waiting for Dan at the elevator and hammered him with questions as soon as the door opened. Me, I climbed the much-used stairs and began searching for my room number.

I just knew my eyes were puffy and red from crying and I just knew how sick I felt now. I have only been heartbroken once in my life but this is by far the worst. As soon as the wooden door banged against the wall, gaping open, I slowly walked in and threw myself on my bed. My bag dropped with a thud to the floor as I curled up into a tight ball.

Dan had rejected me. He did not want anything to do with me. He did not love me back.

‘Because you're disgusting,’ a sinister voice whispered inside of me. My eyes went wide with fear as I

looked over at the figure standing on the other side of the room.

'He hates you, and he'll never love you' it hissed. Shaking, I sat up and peered over at the short pale boy with cracked grey lips. Bobby Shipparro…

'You're not real!' I yelled, grabbing the side of my head, and squeezing my eyes shut.

'Oh, I'm really all right. If sadness, abandonment, and fear live inside of you, I will always exist,' his unearthly voice jeered, a smile creeping onto his face and making his lips crack, spilling blood.

‘No! You cannot! I did nothing wrong! I didn’t kill you!’ I yelled louder; my voice was hoarse with tears. This did not faze the ghost-like Bobby.

He just took one step closer and smiled wider.

‘Face- it Taylor. You are alone… And you always will be.’

I did not stop my fury as another hoarse scream left my throat and I grabbed the vase on the nightstand, flinging it across the room. It flew through the haunting figure and smashed into the wall behind. Water and shards went flying as tears blurred my vision.

‘Always alone… Always alone… always, always, always…’ then the voice disappeared, taking its unwelcome form with it and I pulled my knees to my chest. This could not be happening. Why was this happening to me? I did not deserve any of it.

Yet my mind started to wonder at something else. What if the voice was right? I would always be alone, forever alone in a world, no human being could face by themselves.

Head jerking sobs started to escape from my throat and I clutched my stomach in agony. I did not belong in this place anymore. Maybe running

was my only solution and it was my fate to forever run.

‘Taylor! Taylor are you in there?’ Someone called on the other side of my door. I recognized it as Adrienne’s voice but I did not dare leave my huddled position in fear I might break to pieces.

‘Taylor? What’s wrong?’ Adrienne called. She sounded really concerned for me, almost worried for my wellbeing. But I knew better, I would forever be alone. No one cared about me.

‘Taylor open the door!’ Adrienne yelled, her fist banging on the door.

‘Just leave me alone!’ I yelled back, making her banging stop, ‘I don’t need you or anybody!’

‘Taylor!’ Adrienne said shocked, her voice alight muffle.

‘Just go away!’ I screamed louder, rocking in the curled-up position I sat in. There was a long pause in front of the door.

‘Fine, have it your way,’ Adrienne said coldly and started

walking down the hall, footsteps disappearing from earshot.

‘Just everyone leaves- me- alone,’ I murmured, salty tears falling into my mouth and soaking my knees.

‘Just everyone- go- away!’

~*~

I needed to find Dan and fast. Taylor was not acting like this when she left and as her friend, I knew she needed my help. When I heard the loud crash come from her room I rushed over immediately. I could hear her crying inside and knew she needed help

but she would not open the door. It was not like Taylor to seem so depressed.

‘Dan!’ I called, banging on his room door hard. ‘Dan! Open up!’

There was a long silence before finally Dan swung his door open and glared at me from his post at six feet tall. I took a deep breath and placed my hands on my hips.

‘What’s wrong with Taylor?’ I asked bluntly. Dan blinked and did not even twitch in the hard-core expression he was giving me.

‘It’s none of your concern Adrienne…’

I was close to exploding.

‘None of my concern… She is my friend! Now tell me what you did to her so I can slap you in the face… Hard,’ even I knew Dan wasn’t fazed by that statement but he did look on the verge of exploding himself.

‘What I did to her? Adrienne, she kissed me, me and Taylor kissed, and then she went off making out with her ex-boyfriend!’ He yelled; I had not seen Dan so steamed since…

‘Dan… her ex-boyfriend?’ I said in disbelief. Dan leaned away from my face and seemed to deflate a little.

‘Yes…’

‘Did she say sorry Dan? Did she say anything to you?’ I asked, searching his face as his eyebrows furrowed and he straightened up back into his defiant stature.

‘She…’ I nodded, urging him on, ‘She told me she loves me.’

I think you could have heard a pin drop in that doorway. I looked down at my feet that were crossed nervously on the blue carpet, and then back up at Dan’s blind eyes, that seemed to see so much.

‘And you rejected her’ my statement hung in the air as I peered in at Dan. His face was like that of someone trying to figure out a hard puzzle.

‘I did, but she deserved it,’ he said finally, moving to close the door but I stopped him.

‘She’s not Natalie you know? Taylor’s different,’ I persisted, Dan’s eyes showed surprise and then flickering back to a dark void.

‘I thought the same thing, but you didn’t witness what I did.’ There was a pain in his words and I wanted to comfort him but did not knowledge. I

tried one more tactic though, I needed him to at least talk to her.

'And you didn't hear what I heard' I said, getting a questioning look from him, 'Taylor isn't handling all of this so well. She has been through a lot, Dan. I… I heard her throwing things and sobbing in her room. Dan, she does love you.'

He stood in the doorway, face unchanging.

'Fine, don't believe me but believe this. A girl is sobbing and carrying on in her room, thinking that she will forever be alone in the world. I know one thing, and that's Merry Kate

won’t be too happy to have the blood of another on her hands if Taylor does something drastic.’

My eyes parted open gingerly as peeks of early morning light tried to filter through. For a second I forgot everything. My confession to Dan, his rejection, and the ghost-like Bobby.

Sadly though, the horrifying reality came back to haunt my soul and a shiver went down my spine as I sat up in bed. Crust caked the sides of my eyes as I swung my legs over the side of my bed to stand. I stopped suddenly at the shards of glass glimmering in the sunlight. I sighed and retracted my legs

to the comfort of my bed. I had forgotten all about my wild rage and the vase that went flying from my hand.

Grabbing the magazine on my side table I scooped up the shards nearby and took a hesitant step toward my slippers. I forced myself not to look to the other side of the room where the crude Bobby Shipparro once stood.

I finally retrieved protection for my feet and stifled the tears that were overwhelming my senses. I felt like I could break at any moment and that if I did not splash some water on my face I might vomit.

Rushing over to the bathroom sink I stared at the girl in the mirror. Her once jubilant green eye was dull and void of life. Cheeks once flushed with life were now pale with a touch of death. Her hair that was once her most beautiful asset was now limp and tangled.

Shaking my head furiously I dunked my hands in the running water and quickly splashed the refreshing liquid on my face. But not even the colony's fresh tap water could make me forget the events of yesterday.

Still shaken up I jumped when a loud knock came from my room door.

Peaking around the bathroom door I watched the shadow block the stream of light beneath my door.

'I just might betray you so you might as well leave!!!' I yelled stubbornly, pulling my head back into the bathroom and drying my face on a towel. My snark comment did not stop the knocker from knocking. 'I'm serious! I just might confess my love to you and you still won't forgive me.'

In a weird and twisted way, I needed to joke my way out of the hurt.

I did not want the person on the other side of the door to know that I was about close to tears and go

through the brush in my hand on their face when they opened the door.

The knocker persisted yet still and I finally found myself walking towards the door. Why couldn't people get the hint that I just was not up for socializing today?

'Do I need to spell it out for you? I don't-,' I stopped suddenly as my palm lingered on the doorknob. The door stood wide open but I did not utter a single word to the figure in front of me.

'Taylor, I think we should talk' said the painful smocked over grey eyes

that continued to stare at my strained expression.

‘Sure,’ I choked, ‘Dan.’

‘Can I come in?’ Dan asked after a long and tedious silence. I was compelled to slam the door in his rather- handsome face but thought the better of it as I opened the door wider. He nodded and took the last two steps inside.

I walked gingerly over to the side of my bed and took a hesitant seat. Dan was here, in my room and the atmosphere was different from the other times he visited. I fiddled with my

fingers as he stared in the direction of the leftover shards of glass on the floor.

‘I was able to snag a sample of the death shots’ he said absentmindedly, leisurely walking around the room and picking up stuff from my dresser only to put it down again.

‘Really?’ I asked, wondering at his casual conversation starter.

‘Yes really, the colonies lab is examining it right now; there could be a breakthrough.’ I watched as Dan picked up a picture of me and my sisters. What did he wish to see when he touched a picture frame? I had the

look of death on my face while they smiled cheerily, and I was only three.

'That's… good,' I felt like there was a thick brick wall of tension between me and Dan as he explored the room. I visibly cringed as he stopped in the same spot the translucent Bobby Shipparro stood in, his haunting voice still racking my brain. Dan looked over at my now ashen white face and frowned.

'What's wrong?' His face was calculating, 'You're turning pale.'

I shook my head vigorously, my reddish-brown hair slapping my face.

‘Nothing, it’s nothing, Dan. Just tell me, what exactly did you come for?’

There, I said it, the one question that had been nagging at the back of my brain since he stepped into the room. Dan finally moved away from the foreboding spot in the room and stood in front of me.

‘Adrienne came and talked to me yesterday,’ he said slowly as if waiting for my reaction. I was a little surprised but, yet, still, a part of me knew Adrienne would do something like that.

‘What did she say?’ I stuttered. Dan looked over the top of my head and

seemed to be choosing his words carefully.

‘She said you weren’t well… she said you needed me,’ if he could see my face, he would have seen my bottom lip trembling and the way I shook my head vigorously. I did not need anyone anymore.

‘Well,’ I started, standing up to face a towering Dan, ‘She’s wrong. I don’t need anyone, not anymore.’ Dan’s eyebrows wrinkled in concern and he missed over eyes flashed that of worry. Was it possible that he could forgive? My mind did not linger on that hope.

‘Taylor doesn’t say that. Everyone needs at least someone in their life. No one can ever face life like that of us gifted alone,’ he said. As he talked, I just shook my head even more. I would not fill my head with dreams of something better anymore. Something better was not down my alley.

‘Don’t try to feel sorry for me Dan. I get it ok. I was stupid to think you loved me back.’ Dan moved to say something but I quickly cut him off. ‘As I said, it is ok, I except what I was meant for. It is my fate to run. Which is why I am going to leave and forget all about you, the colony…’

-And-

Dan grabbed me by the sides of my arm fiercely and zoned in on my face. ‘You are not going anywhere you hear me!’

I continued to talk as if I had not heard him. ‘…Just forget the memories- I’ve made here because memories only make it hurt more.’ I do not know where the tear came from, but I could not wipe it away because of Dan’s hard grip on my arm.

‘Taylor, I don’t want you to leave,’ he said softly. I had never seen Dan so vulnerable in all the time I have

known him. ‘I want you to stay here, with me.’

I looked down at my feet. ‘You made it clear yesterday that you don’t want me here.’

Dan’s eyes seemed to glaze over as he softened his grip on my arm.

‘I think I should tell you about Natalie.’

~*~

‘Natalie?’ I said, looking up into his clear water eyes. Dan nodded slowly and nudged me to sit down. I did and watched as he took a seat next to me. He had this faraway look in his

eyes as if saying this girl's name transported him to another world. 'Who is Natalie Dan?'

'She was everything' he started, startling me a little. A sad smile formed on his lips. 'She was everything you could want in a girl. Hair and eyes fit for a goddess. Attitude fit for a queen. Not to mention the fact that she was the strongest mind reader the colony had.' Dan chuckled as if remembering some inside joke.

'She was everything, and then… I lost her…' My stomach twanged and a pang coursed through me. Natalie died?

‘She died?’ I asked aloud. Dan looked at me in surprise.

‘No, no, no, that’s not how I lost her,’ he said quickly. I sighed and he continued to look at the wall in front of us. ‘I lost her to someone else.’

A guilty realization slapped me in the face. Natalie had hurt Dan the same way I did, breaking his heart forever. It is why he was so upset with me. It is why he was not so ready to forgive, and even though I was jealous of how much he loved this Natalie girl, I wished things would have worked out better for the heartbroken Dan in front of me. Dan cleared his throat and

opened his mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

‘Dan, you cared about her, didn’t you?’ I asked, my voice sounding like a sock was stuck in my throat. He only nodded and it felt awkward sitting there with him in the still silence. I started to think about the boy sitting next to me who always had a shell built up around him, and how now this very same shell was crumbling right before my eyes. I could not help but almost feel how helpless Dan felt when he knew he could not stop Natalie from leaving him. I could almost imagine him

blaming himself for the heartache he had to go through.

I could only help but think that I had done the same thing Natalie did.

‘Dan I’m so sorry’ I knew the words were empty, void of meaning but I still said them… ‘I wish I could take everything back.’

Dan buried his face in his palms as if secretly wiping the tears away that were about to fall. ‘I’m no better. I should not have… I should not have yelled at you back in the city. I hurt you, Taylor. I’m sorry.’

A guilty wave spread- through my bones. Why was Dan saying sorry? Why was he being so selfless for an undeserving me?

'Why would you throw the vase?' he asked suddenly, breaking me from my guilty torment. I looked over to see Dan staring at me now and then I looked at the remaining pieces of glass on the floor. My eyes focused over to the spot Bobby Shapparro's deceased form stood and I shivered.

'I saw… I heard something I did not like. I was just upset. People tend to do the unthinkable in rage.' Dan could sense the tears coming to my

eyes because he put his arm around my waist, surprising me.

'What did you hear? What did you see?.' They were simple questions but I was not too ready to answer them. Not without reliving the moment.

'I- I don't think I can tell you-'

Dan sighed making strands of my hair quiver. 'It's ok. I understand.'

He pulled me closer to his side and a longing overcame my senses. Was Dan just being nice? Did he still have feelings for me? I tilted my head so that I was looking up into his grey eyes and face hiding grief. I wanted

him so bad right then. I wanted him to lean down and meet my face in the most wonderful kiss imaginable. I wanted Dan to want me and I had never felt so desperate and needy like this before.

Dan sensed all the emotions I had so carelessly broadcasted and moved his eyes in my direction. They were the eyes of a teenage boy hesitant at any chance of love. Someone who had his heart broken more than once to know he would not leave himself vulnerable again.

A gasp escaped my throat as Dan lifted his hand to my chin,

anchoring it as he traced a thumb across my bottom lip. How was it possible that this boy could make me feel so special by the trivial things he did? My heart ached at the thought of not kissing him.

‘Please, Dan. Do not do this to me. I love you too much to just sit here and not want to kiss you’ I found myself saying, leaving my emotions bare and raw for Dan to easily sense.

He smiled only a little and his eyebrows arched in the way of someone going through a painful and arduous process.

‘I want to know for sure Taylor. I want to know for sure that you aren’t going to hurt me again’ he said finally, the words leaving his lips and brushing my face. I shivered as he caressed the side of my face.

‘I love you, Dan. I couldn’t imagine ever again doing something to hurt you’ I placed a shaking hand on his chest. ‘I promise in my life.’

I was surprised as Dan suddenly swooped me up into his arms and placed me on his lap His strong arms braced my hip as he looked up at me now, my green eyes showing surprise.

‘I was hoping you’d say that,’ he breathed.

I wished I had a magic bottle to capture the kiss that came next.

‘Glad you two could finally join us,’ Merry-Kate smiled, her glossy red hair in a lazy side ponytail.

Portion

I and Dan quickly found a seat at the table. I spotted Adrienne across the way and she smiled, seeing that I and Dan finally worked things out. We were in a large room with light blue walls and a dark plush blue carpet. The

giant polished wood round table we sat at could hold a good twenty people.

It was the meeting room and Merry-Kate had called us in here for business.

It was me, Dan, Adrianne, Sean, Taylor, Merry-Kate, and fourteen other ground dwellers I did not recognize. I have to say it was weird sitting in the same room as Taylor with Dan right beside me but it did not bother me too much.

‘We’re all here today to talk about the anti-mutation shots, aka the death shots,’ Merry announced, getting right to the point. Everyone held their

breath for what she would say next. ‘As you all may already know, our lab experts are dissecting the sample Dan and Taylor were able to snag.’

Every person at the table turned to look at us and I inadvertently turned invisible.

‘There is a very slim chance but I have been informed that there could be an antidote,’ she finished. A loud sigh was released from every person sitting there and Dan loosened his grip on my hand.

Merry pressed a hidden button under the table and we all watched as a part of the top of the table slid away to

reveal a hologram projector. A fuzzy image of a DNA strand appeared in the air and Merry-Kate started to talk again.

‘This is an image of how those of us with abilities’ DNA strands look,’ she pointed to the purplish segments covering parts of the DNA, ‘what the anti-mutation shots do is dissolve these purple segments, thus making us ‘normal’ again.’

Everyone stared at the blinking image until suddenly it vanished as Merry-Kate clicked the button again. ‘So, then what do we do until we wait

for the antidote?' Dan asked, breaking the silence that had enveloped us.

'We retaliate,' the redheaded nineteen-year-old started, 'we convince others like us to rebel against these… death shots and help those who have had the shots forced on them.'

'Forced…?' I asked, my voice hard. Could the government do that?

'Yes forced,' Merry sighed. Suddenly she lifted her watch to her mouth and called into it, 'bring him in.'

The shiny wooden door swung open immediately, and everyone stared at a young boy who was brought into

the room. He looked no older than nine and hid behind Merry-Kate as soon as he was brought in.

‘This is Timothy guys, he’s only ten years old and used to have abilities just like us… until…’ everyone held their breath as Merry-Kate tried to find the right words, ‘he was taken away from his parents and the shot was forced on him.’

We all gasped and a colonist who looked around the same age as Merry-Kate stood up. ‘And what exactly do you plan to do with the boy?’ the girl asked Merry, her dark black hair curtaining her face. ‘Keep him safe,

watch over him and, when the time comes, give him the antidote to the shots.'

The table broke out in conversation and I watched as the boy hid further behind Merry-Kate. He was scared but he had this look on his face as if he did not want anyone to know just how scared he was. His deep brown hair fell into his deep brown eyes that seemed to be void of life. The shots had messed him up.

'What was his ability?' I asked Merry-Kate, the room going silent with my question.

‘One look from his eyes, and he could make you do whatever he wanted.’

My eyes wavered back to the boy and I saw his eyes dart to my face and quickly move away. I felt a tingle as if his powers were supposed to do something to me, but then it vanished. The shots had taken away every drop.

‘If the antidote doesn’t work?’ Sean’s loud voice boomed, ‘what if it has side effects, the kid’s not a guinea pig.’

More conversation erupted at that possibility and I could see Merry-Kate losing her tolerance. ‘Quiet!’ she

yelled, and everyone's mouths clamped shut. It was not on their own though, Merry-Kate had done it, and I marveled at her ability.

'Now,' she said more sweetly, 'who would like to take care of the boy until I can work this whole shot thing out?'

She dug into her pocket and pulled out two sticks of gum, handing one to the boy and popping the other in her mouth.

No one raised their hands and everyone stayed glued to their seats.

It was sad. How could people be so selfish?

‘Well, the little booger is going to have to-’

‘I’ll take him,’ I said abruptly, raising a determined hand high in the air.

‘Are you sure you’ll be able to handle this Taylor?’

Dan and I stood quietly outside my room door as timid timothy got settled inside. Looking up into Dan’s mystical orbs, I tried to find the right words for his question. Who knows? I

am not cut out for the whole ‘taking on a kid,’ thing.

Dan was still giving me a questioning look as I peeked in on Timothy who was eyeing my pictures and trying to find a good place to put his bags.

‘I’ll be fine,’ I assured him, a warm smile slipping unto my face, ‘How hard can taking care of a ten-year-old kid be? I was ten once.’

An unconvinced Dan still looked at me with an uneasy expression. He sighed though and planted a swift kiss on my forehead. ‘Hope you’re right. The kid’s been

through a lot so it might not be as easy as you think.' I let my petite fingers travel up his chest until a single finger lingered on his chin. 'No faith in me huh?'

He chuckled and surprised me as his broad hands caught my waist and pulled me into him. 'I never said I didn't have faith in you. I'm just stating the possibility that you might not be able to handle this.'

His hair was looking so messy and cute now, his eyes a deep-sea of mystery, that I did not even focus on the words leaving his mouth. I had Dan. I finally had Dan.

-And-

I felt like the luckiest girl in the world.

‘Taylor, are you listening to me?’

If it were not for the fact that Dan had raised a single eyebrow, breaking the fixated trance I had on his face, he would have never gotten an answer from me. ‘Oh… um sorry, I was just…’ A blush leaked unto my face and Dan smiled broadly.

‘Get back to the kid. He needs you.’

I nodded and moved away from him only to be pulled back. ‘A kiss for the night?’ he asked slyly.

‘You read my mind,’ I retorted, tilting my face upward.

‘What are you doing?’

If it were possible, I jumped ten feet backward. Dan was barely able to catch me and steady my swaying body as a curious Timothy stared up at us. I blushed deeply and flickered in and out of visibility. Dan sighed and I had to take several deep breaths so that I could face the confused ten-year-old.

‘It was nothing Tim, do you mind if I call you Tim?’ He nodded his head yes, ‘It was nothing, I’ll be in shortly. Go unpack, you can have the bottom drawers.’

The kid could not catch a hint though because he crossed his arm defiantly. ‘That didn’t look like ‘Nothing.’ It looked like he was going to kiss you… on the lips.’

If there was ever a moment to turn redder, it was then. I frowned over at Dan who seemed amused at all of this. Whatever emotions he was sensing, they had him on the verge of cracking up.

‘I’ll catch you later Taylor,’ he chuckled, giving me a quick peck on the cheek, ‘Have fun!’

It did not take a genius to know that the last part was pure sarcasm.

~*~

‘So, welcome to my humble abode!’ I announced, spreading my arms wide as Timothy looked hesitantly around the room. His thick brown hair shielded any emotions his eyes were showing as he slowly took unsure steps around the space. While he got familiarized with everything, I piled a bunch of sheets, that Merry Kate had

given me, on the floor and tried to make it as comfortable as possible.

'Here's your bed Tim, hope it's comfortable enough,' I sighed, rising to a stand, and looking over at an exploring Timothy. He happened to be standing in the same spot the eerie Bobby Shipparro had stood and it made me shiver. 'Come on Timothy, check it out and tell me what you think.'

He made his way over to the bed, kicking off his shoes, and slipping underneath the wool blanket. He smiled a small smile, 'It's better than where they had met before.'

This made me frown but I quickly smothered it with a smile of my own and went over to my drawer for pajamas. ‘Where are you going?’ Timothy asked urgently, sitting up in his makeshift bed. His hair had fallen to the side giving me a good look at his scared brown eyes. Again, I felt a tingle but nothing happened.

‘It’s ok Tim, I’m not going to leave you, I’m just going to the bathroom to change.’

He did not look convinced but nodded his head slowly and finally laid back down. He had serious abandonment issues, I noticed.

This kid would need a lot of love.

‘Um… Taylor? Taylor are you awake?’

Small hands were shaking me awake as I turned over in my sleep, wiping the crud out of my eye. ‘I am now,’ I muttered, trying to peer through the darkness. For a second my eyes went wide when I saw a boy at the edge of my bed. The first thing that came to my mind was Bobby Shipparro. Then, I remembered that I had taken in a ten-year-old named Timothy.

‘Tim is everything okay?’ I whispered.

He seemed hesitant. ‘I just- I kind of can’t sleep and I was wondering if I could probably sleep at the end of your bed or maybe-’

‘Come on in Tim-my-boy,’ I mumbled, lifting the covers, and scooting over a little. Tim seemed about ready to protest, but soon he was crawling under the covers. I lowered the comforter and tucked him in nice and tight. I could feel him smiling in the darkness.

‘Sorry I woke you up,’ he whispered, guilt lacing his words.

‘It’s ok, you were scared and that’s understandable,’ I whispered back, ruffling his hair.

‘I wasn’t scared I just said I couldn’t sleep,’ he seemed to have to clarify.

‘Sure,’ I murmured, my eyes drifting to a close. Whatever he said afterward was lost to my ears. Sleep took hold once again.

~*~

‘Tim?’ I shot up in my bed and looked around the now sunlit room.

Something in my head woke me up saying ‘you’ve got a kid to look

after! Can’t sleep in late!’ Rubbing my eyes, I looked over to the empty spot next to me in bed and opened them wider. There was supposed to be a ten-year-old boy in that exact spot.

I began to panic.

‘Tim?’ I called again, stumbling out of the bed, and heading for the bathroom door. ‘Timothy?’ I thought that he went to use the bathroom, knowing kids and their weak bladders. Yet when I knocked on the door and went as far as peeking inside there was no one in there- at all.

Pushing the bathroom door all the way open, I hobbled inside because

of my sleeping foot and began brushing my teeth. I needed to find the kid before Merry Kate found him spending time together with some hungover telematic blond.

I quickly swept my hair up into a ponytail, pulled on a cotton grey shirt and some faded blue skinnies. Dashing out of my door, I ran down the stairs at the end of the hall and looked around at the trashed lobby area. There were plastic cups everywhere. I even saw a few people crashed out on some of the couches.

This place did not go one night without a party.

Suddenly, I heard chuckling and giggling coming from the kitchen and jogged towards it, pushing open the swinging whitewashed door. ‘Tim!’ I called, face flushed. The door swung shut behind me as I looked across the granite island to see Dan wearing a floury apron and Tim mixing a batter of something gooey.

‘Hi Taylor, we’re making pancakes,’ Timothy said calmly, flour all in his thick brown hair. ‘Dan says he can’t make pancakes all that good because he can’t see well so he asked me to help him.’

I blinked twice, three times, before walking slowly over to them.

‘But you should have told me where you were going.’

Dan’s murky blue eyes moved towards the sound of my voice, his mouth smiling. ‘Sorry we didn’t wake you up Taylor, you just looked really tired and Tim had been- up for a while. He said he was bored and hungry- so-o, I asked him if he wanted to help me make pancakes.’

I suddenly felt guilty. The poor kid was up forever and I just slept away. My cheeks flushed red. Dan made his way to Tim and planted a soft

kiss on my cheek. ‘It’s okay,’ he whispered in my ear, ‘you don’t have to feel guilty, it’s your first day on the job.’

‘Hey Dan, can I pour it into the pan now?’ Tim spoke up, his hair moving aside enough for me to see his eyes brighter than ever. To see him happy.

‘Sure,’ answered Dan, ‘Just be a careful buddy.’

I watched them as they talked with each other and could not help smiling. The way they were talking was like they have known each other for a long time. I knew that Dan, no matter

how blind he was, could make his pancakes. But the fact that he made Tim feel needed was only plain cute to me. As Tim concentrated on pouring the batter into the pan, I planted a quick kiss on Dan's soft lips. 'You're the best,' I whispered.

~*~

'Finally, you brought the little booger in,' Merry-Kate murmured to the clear vile she was holding up to the light as me, Dan, and Tim walked in. She looked like a mad scientist with a long white coat, blood-red hair in pigtails, and that crazy smirk on her face.

We had walked into a stark white lab I did not even know The Colony had. Tim went to touch a bubbling vile but I gently smacked his hand away. ‘We got your message from Adrienne,’ spoke up Dan, his body rigid with all the chemicals flowing through the air. All the different smells were making his senses whirl.

‘Yes, and you couldn’t have been any slower, could you?’ The feisty red-head snarled, only a slight playfulness in her voice. She was serious about that vile in her hand.

Merry-Kate turned to them and snapped a big pair of goggles off her

head. Placing the vile down gently, she began delicately taking off thick blue latex gloves. ‘Is that the cure for the shots?’ I spoke up, unable to contain my curiosity.

Merry shrugged and wiped the beads of sweat from her forehead.

‘Who knows? I’ve been in here with my little lab geeks all night and this little vile of blue stuff is all we’ve got so far.’ It was not until then that I noticed her red-rimmed eyes.

‘You’ve been here all night?’ Tim’s small voice spoke up, the question dying down to a whisper as Merry-Kate’s blue eyes fell on him.

‘Yes,’ she answered simply, ‘Told the lab rats to leave around midnight, but I just couldn’t go yet. Every serum we produced led to another breakthrough. Then I was finally met with this and I think it might be a dead end. I can’t find the missing link.’

‘Have you tried it yet?’ I asked earnestly, my hands resting on Tim’s shoulders. That is when I saw Merry-Kate’s eyes land on his floppy brown head and knew what she was thinking. ‘I see. So that’s why you called us down here.’ It was not a question, more of a

statement, and Merry let her glossed mouth coil into a smirk.

‘There’s no other way. Unless you know how to give guinea pigs powers so that I can give them the shot and then this serum then we’re out of luck.’

I looked over to a weary Dan. Timothy grew stiff under my touch, sensing what was going on. The only thing that was running through my head was the many side effects that were possible when it came to an unmarked vile. I only had the kid for one day and already I was putting him in danger.

Suddenly, I felt warm broad hands taking my small ones off Tim's shoulders. I looked behind me up into Lane's blank stare as he said,

'We've got to do what's best for The Colony.'

MISSED ME…?

Continued:

This was normal…

Merry Kate told us that the serum would induce Timothy into a sleepy state. So then why was I worrying so much?

'You should head back to your room Taylor,' Dan leaned down to

whisper in my ear. It was getting late and I had not left Tim's side since he fell asleep. 'Merry said that he has to sleep in the lab so that she can keep track of his vitals. She will look out for him. You need to sleep.'

I sighed, squeezing Timothy's small hand before letting go. What if he woke up, expecting me to be by his side, and found no one?

'Fine,' I muttered, pushing out of the seat, and facing a standing Dan. His own pale eyes were beginning to grow bags under them as well. He refused to leave my side just as much as I refused to leave Tim's.

We began the short distance back to my room and I was again reminded of how annoying Dan's abilities could be. 'Don't worry Taylor,' he said, grabbing my hand. 'Tim's a tough kid. His vitals were stable so there's nothing to be scared about.'

I rolled my eyes, trying and failing to pull my hand free. 'Who said I was scared?'

Dan chuckled and somehow managed to pull me closer. He kept his arms around me the whole way to my room. 'Are you mad- at me?' He asked suddenly, as we stopped by my door.

I looked up at him, in all his glory, a little surprised at the abruptness of his question. Though he annoyed me sometimes with his keen sense of emotions, I was not feeling any amount of anger towards Dan. I was finally starting to see him as… my boyfriend.

‘Why do you ask?’

At that, Dan’s wondering gaze locked onto my face with scary accuracy. ‘Because of what I said yesterday,’ he replied earnestly. ‘I told you that the Colony was more important than Timothy and I didn’t have the right to-’

Dan’s next words were never heard as I stood on my tip-toes to reach his lips. They were hesitant and startled, but a few seconds later they were pressing back. ‘I’m not mad at you,’ I whispered, leaning away from his mouth. ‘Worried, but not angry.’

Dan’s hands caressed my face as he pushed away hair that was hindering him from feeling every inch. ‘Don’t be,’ he smiled, and kissed my forehead.

Sighing, I grabbed his hands and lowered them from my face. ‘I better get to bed now. I want to be able

to wake up early just in case Tim wakes up to no one.'

Dan nodded- 'Right.' His eyes wandered once again.

'Goodnight,' I whispered, letting go of his hand. 'Remember I'm not mad.'

Dan chuckled. 'I know,' he whispered back, watching as I opened my door. 'If you need me you know where to find me.'

I smiled. 'Always.'

~*~

'What do you mean he still hasn't woken up yet?!'

Merry Kate gave me a stern look and placed a ruby nail on her lip. ‘Quiet!’ she whispered harshly. ‘If you startle him out of his sleep his heart rate might spike!’

I huffed, crossing my arms stubbornly. Dan, Merry Kate, and I were all standing outside of the lab. There was a sleeping Timothy inside with Blue liquid racing through his veins, and he still was not up.

Dan took my hand. ‘Everything’s going to be ok, Taylor.’

‘Listen to your boyfriend,’ Merry Kate snapped, causing me to turn red and flicker in and out of

visibility. ‘Tim’s body needs rest. His whole DNA structure is being repaired and that takes time. His immune system will be down for a while.’

‘Fine,’ I conceded.

Merry Kate visibly deflated and turned to the white double doors. ‘Good, now scram. I’ve got a lot of work to do and I can’t have you smothering me with your motherly instincts.’ She removed a cherry lollipop from her coat and placed it in her mouth before disappearing.

I playfully stuck out my tongue in her direction and pulled on Dan’s

arm. ‘Come on,’ I announced. ‘Let us find something to do.’

Dan followed along and placed a hand on his chin. ‘A date?’

My feet froze. ‘What was that?’

‘A date,’ he repeated, smiling slightly. ‘We haven’t gone anywhere or done anything together since… we made up. Don’t you think a date would be nice?’

I shrugged even though he could not see it. ‘I don’t know… I guess so. It’s just that…’

‘Are you afraid of going outside?’ Dan asked, detecting my hesitance.

‘No,’ I answered truthfully. My reddish-brown hair suddenly seemed so interesting.

‘Then what is it?’ He asked, ‘There’s no harm in-’

‘What are we?’ I suddenly asked. My green eyes quickly flicked to Dan to observe the shocked expression on his face. ‘I mean it seems pretty obvious, but I don’t want to delude myself. I want to hear you say it.’

Dan’s arm reached out and pulled me into him. I found my hands instinctively clutching at his shirt. ‘Taylor if having a title means that much to you then yes, we’re boyfriend and girlfriend, but does that matter? I love you and I know you love me.’

I looked up at him, feeling slightly guilty for forcing him to explain… us.

‘Don’t feel guilty,’ Dan said, reading my feelings.

I smiled and pushed away from him. ‘Well, it’s hard when you’re always right.’ ‘It’s a date then?’ His hand reached for mine once again and we

found ourselves walking towards the elevators that led to outside. Merry Kate and Dan were right. For now, Timothy was fine. If I kept worrying instead of having hope, I would end up being the one in critical condition.

‘Let us have fun for once… boyfriend.’

…And then the dream snapped to nothing but black like film ripping away from her and her mind, both linked together in this dreamlike state, of showing past present and further.

Taylor- ‘whoa- I feel like I just went through my most if not my whole life… in one dream… with you for this…

‘She said this to Naddalin who was taking it all down in her notebook.